the man of my nightmares

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the man of my nightmares

by dontcallmeeds

Summary

After Todd Anderson started getting nightmares about his best friend and secret crush Neil Perry dying, his life seemed to be plagued by it; with that, and the pressure to tell Neil how he feels, his life definitely takes a turn. And are his dreams just dreams, or are they more?

Meanwhile, Charlie Dalton's crush on Knox Overstreet seems to be hopeless as Knox chases after the girl of his dreams, Chris. Knox seems oblivious to Charlie's suggestions, but is it all just a ruse...? Who does Knox truly care for, and is he willing to risk everything to follow through with it?

Notes

Hello! This is my first chapter of my DPS fanfiction which I have been writing for months now :) I am not finished with it just yet as I am writing this, but I plan on finishing it very soon. I just wanted to put something out into the world for people to see, because I care about this project a lot. It has been on my mind 24/7.

Anyway, this is canon divergence (I'm sure everyone knows what we're diverging from haha) but some of the dialogue is word for word from the movie (in some of the later chapters) but with a little twist or with how I personally see the scenes in the character's heads, just to give a little extra detail that you can't get from movies on their own.

Thanks, and I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 1: a nightmare fit for winter

Todd Anderson had his fair share of nightmares--mostly consisting of a bi-weekly terror that involved his mother finding out about a C he got in chemistry and getting a nice whipping from his father's belt--but the worst one, *by far*, was the one where his roommate and best friend, Neil Perry, had shot himself in the head and died. It was a nightmare entirely fit for winter--even in his dream he could feel his arms covered in prickly cold goosebumps. He remembered his friends piling into his room, telling him the news, and in response, stumbling through the winter snow outside on the hill like a madman, crying and wailing and screaming out Neil's name into the void, hoping it would somehow bring him back.

He remembered being almost blinded by all of the light reflecting off the white snow into his eyes, and how all he could think of was Neil--of him with a gun against his head, Neil in pain, bleeding, Neil feeling so much dread that he decided that he couldn't live in the world anymore--and it was suffocating. The poets watched in miserable silence as Todd walked until the snow froze his legs so bad he could hardly walk anymore, and he just wailed and cried and screamed until the poets started to drag him back to his room.

Then, he heard a voice calling back to him; was it Neil, calling from the grave? Todd whispered his name again under his breath: "Neil." He pulled himself away from his friends' arms and stumbled around, looking for him, and the poets looked at him like he was crazy. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Charlie Dalton asked.

"*Neil!* " Todd screamed out again. The poets went back to grab him.

"Todd!" He could hear Neil's voice distinctly, like he was speaking right in Todd's ear. "Todd, wake up. *Wake up!* "

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"Todd. Wake up, buddy."

Todd's eyes almost had to adjust from the blinding white snow to the dark tones of his own bedroom. It was still dark outside, probably early morning, and his mouth had to take a second to remember how to speak. It wasn't even winter at Welton yet--only on the brink, with all of the leaves fallen from the trees and the temperatures getting lower and lower by the week--and yet he felt the effects of a freezing winter chill on his bare legs. The nightmare had chewed him up and spit him out, leaving him shaking and trembling like a scared puppy until his eyes met Neil Perry's. *Neil.* He wasn't sure if he was still dreaming, or if he was in Heaven, but either way, he liked it.

"Hey, hey, it's okay." Neil sat down on Todd's bed, just an inch from Todd's shivering legs. "You're alright, Todd." Neil's voice was like a sedative, smooth and soothing and soft.

"Neil," Todd choked out, sitting up in his bed. Neil's cheeks were so *red,* so full of warmth, so *alive.* He at first wasn't sure that his eyes weren't deceiving him. After that nightmare he just had, he had so many things he felt like he needed to say, but didn't know how to. *You just died in my dream, and I need to tell you that I--that I--* He shut down that thought right away. How was he even supposed to explain it? "What--what time is it?" He asked instead.

"Uh, I'm not sure. You were..." he yawned. "You were having a nightmare, and you were yelling--"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"

"Don't worry about it, Todd. Really." He slid closer on Todd's brown bedsheets, looking right into Todd's eyes with his own chocolatey brown ones. "Hey, that nightmare really did a number on you. You're still shaking." It was true, but Todd really wasn't cold anymore.

"It's okay now," Todd said, his voice trembling. "I--I'm fine."

"Now, don't just say that if you don't mean it." Neil's voice was stern now, serious. His eyebrows furrowed as he searched Todd's pale face for answers. Todd didn't know how to respond.

"I was just scared, is all."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Neil was so sincere about almost everything under the sun. He knew how to goof off, of course, but when it mattered...he always showed how much he cared. Todd wanted to tell him everything, to just whisper to him, being absolutely candid: *You died. And it was the worst day of my life.*

But he didn't.

“N-No. It’s just a nightmare. I have them all the time.”

“You know, this might sound really embarrassing, actually, but--god, when I was younger, I used to have *horrible* nightmares. I wouldn’t go to sleep at night sometimes because I was so scared. My parents had no idea what to do with me, and my mom...she…” He was silent for a second. “She told me to go over every good thing I have in my life when I have a nightmare. You know, to calm me down. And it worked every time.”

“I’ll have to try it, then.”

“Just an idea.” He smiled and stood up, going to walk over to his bed, when Todd’s voice piped up from behind him.

“Neil?” At his call, Neil turned around immediately, his hands dug into his pajama pants.

“Yeah, Todd?”

“In the nightmare--you died.” That’s all he could get out. He didn't want to get into the nitty gritty details, nor did he want to remember. Neil’s face softened as he remembered the way Todd screamed, the way he shook in his bed, the way he called out his name...

“*Oh.*”

“I guess...what I’m trying to say is...I’m really glad you’re okay.” Neil’s lips rose into a sympathetic grin.

“You don’t have to worry about a thing, Todd. I’m not going anywhere.” He walked across the room to Todd’s bed to pat him on the arm. Neil’s hand was so warm, and Todd’s arm was so...cold. It almost shocked him. “Poet’s Honor.” He couldn’t help from smiling. “Try to go to bed so you don’t sleep through Hager’s class tomorrow, okay?” He distinctly remembered Charlie Dalton getting a smack on the wrist with Hager’s ruler for dozing off in class. He could almost feel the sting on his own hand.

“Okay. Goodnight, Neil.”

“‘Night, Todd.”

As he laid in his bed, his legs finally started to warm back up. He

stared up at the ceiling and started going through that list of good things: *The Dead Poets Society. Mr. Keating's class. Meeks' study sessions,* and last, but not least, *Neil Perry.* He lingered on that until he fell asleep, thinking of the warmth of Neil's cheeks, and of his lips, hoping and praying that he could dream of him, alive.

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"*Jesus,* Todd, you look horrible," Knox Overstreet said as he entered Todd and Neil's room. The morning classes were all over, leaving the fellow members of the DPS filing in one by one and finding a spot to sit. Todd was in a state of recovery; getting through Hager's math class and McAllister's Latin class was almost impossible. The only thing that kept him going was seeing Neil on the other side of the classroom with his reading glasses falling down his nose. Now, he was buried deep into the covers of his flat and uncomfortable bed wishing he could get a quick nap in.

"Wow, thanks, Knox," Todd mumbled.

"You know, he's right, Todd, you *do* look horrible," Charlie added as he stuck his head in.

"Come on, guys," Neil interjected. "He doesn't look that bad." Todd knew, without even seeing himself, that Neil was probably doing him a service. If he looked as bad as he felt, he would probably agree with Knox, too.

"*Look* at him, Neil," Meeks sneered. "His *bags* have bags!" They all couldn't help but chuckle, even Todd, whose laugh turned into a deep yawn.

"Yeah, yeah, I couldn't sleep last night, okay?" He mumbled as his yawn died out.

"D'ya have a bad dream or something?" Pitts asked as he settled onto the floor by Meeks. Todd glanced over at Neil, who was staring right back at him.

"Maybe he was too busy tickling his pickle, if you know what I mean--" Charlie jeered. The whole group groaned.

“I’d rather not talk about it, okay?”

“Yeah, stop hounding him, already,” Neil interjected, once again coming to Todd’s rescue. “Let’s talk study group. I didn't understand anything in Hager’s class today--Cameron, you got an A on the last test, didn't you?”

Todd could feel his eyes drooping again, and this time, he did nothing to stop it. He couldn’t pick out all of the voices around him anymore; they all morphed into one collective noise, one that seemed to mellow out as he slowly let sleep take him.

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The members of the Dead Poets Society all sat around at the table to work on homework, but no one was genuinely paying attention. Neil sat at the head of the table, with Cameron going over his notes from Hager’s math class. Knox and Charlie sat beside each other, acting more rowdy than usual. Knox was usually one of the calmest people when it came down to it, but being around Charlie had some kind of effect on him. Charlie’s spontaneity was almost addictive, and when it wasn’t completely annoying, it was fun to give in to him.

“Neil, did you *really* have to tuck him in?” Knox jeered, complete with a jab to the side.

Todd had fallen asleep almost as soon as they started talking about the study group, but Neil didn't mind. Todd had been avoiding sleep like the plague, he had noticed, and Neil figured that it all stemmed from this abundance of nightmares Todd had mentioned. Last night, though--it wasn’t a regular occurance. Todd’s reaction wasn’t normal. Neil never remembered waking up to his roommate screaming like he was in pain before. He didn't mind being woken up--he could go right back to bed, after all--but seeing Todd react like that...it definitely had an impact on him. It hadn’t left his mind all day.

“Yeah, are you his *mommy?* ” Charlie added. Knox and Charlie laughed at their own jokes.

Todd had looked so uncomfortable on his bed; he was curled up into a ball, shoes on and all, and on top of the covers. It almost looked like he was in pain. When Charlie had come by his dorm to walk with him

to the study group, he looked back at Todd, barely stirring, and decided he couldn't leave him like that. So, while Charlie watched and sneered, he carefully took off Todd's shoes and left them under his bed. He knew he couldn't get Todd under his covers without waking him up, so he took a throw blanket from his side of the room and placed it delicately on top of him. He made sure the blanket covered all the way up to his chin; with winter really starting to hit, the room kept getting colder and colder each night. He didn't want Todd to freeze. When he got close to Todd, tucking the blanket nice and snug, he couldn't help but look at his far from serene sleeping face. He wondered if he was having another nightmare, and if he was, Neil wished he could do something about it; but he couldn't, so he stepped back, watched him for a second, and left with Charlie.

"You can joke all you want--Todd hasn't gotten a full night's sleep in probably a month. I just wanted him to be comfortable."

"Comfortable, huh?" Charlie glanced over at Knox with his eyebrows raised. Knox stifled a chuckle.

"Okay. What's your deal?"

"Nothing. I have no deal. No deal at all." Charlie said it so seriously, but it was obvious that he was dripping with sarcasm. Knox's face was beet red.

"Uh huh." Neil always knew when Charlie was scheming something, or had something to hide. It was obvious, too, that Knox was somehow in on it.

"Oh, cut the shit, Charlie--" Cameron commented. "We're trying to study here." They all stared at him. "What? It's a *study* group. Are we not studying?"

"When have we ever *actually* studied?" Pitts argued.

"I think we have something more *important* to discuss." Charlie leaned back in his chair. "Regarding our main man Neil Perry." Neil's eyebrows shot up.

"I guess you *do* wanna fail Hager's class," Cameron mumbled.

"Hager can suck it," Charlie joked, "because my best friend Neil is in *looooooove.* " Neil scoffed, and leaned back in his seat.

"I wish I had got the memo."

“Neil, my friend, you’re getting it right now.” Charlie slid toward him and put his hand on Neil’s shoulder. “You’re in love. I can sense these things, you know.”

“Well, your sensor must be busted.” He gave Charlie a firm knock on the head. Neil chuckled as he sat back in his seat, but his face was even redder than Knox as he tried to stifle a laugh. Charlie gripped Neil’s shoulder tighter.

“Look--I’m never wrong, Neil, and I’m *definitely* not wrong about this.” Neil let out a nervous chortle. “Come on, Neil. You know it’s true. You look redder than Knox’s asshole.”

“Hey--!” Knox shrieked.

“Can it, Knoxious.” Charlie leaned toward Neil, looking directly into Neil’s eyes.

“What...are you doing.”

“I’m looking into your soul.”

“Oh, really, is that all?”

“Shhhhhhh,” Charlie said, putting his finger up to Neil’s lips. He stayed there for a second, leaving his eyes closed and making weird sounds. “Okay, I’ve got it.”

“Got what?” Knox asked, slumped in his chair. Charlie turned in his chair to face him.

“Knox, babe, I’ve unlocked the secrets of Neil’s soul.” Knox’s face reddened again. He never knew how to react when Charlie called him ‘babe.’

“Good for you,” Neil mumbled, returning to his math homework. Charlie’s head snapped back.

“Wait--don’t you wanna know who you’re in love with?”

Neil didn't need him to say it. Deep down, he already knew.

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Todd woke up on his own, around nine, as he could tell by the pitch black sky outside. By now, he had slept through dinner and almost all of their previously planned study session.

Suddenly, he realized the position he was in: before, he was laying on the top of the sheets with his head smushed into his pillow, but when he woke up, he was neatly tucked in, his shoes even left below the bed for him.

Neil.

His face immediately warmed up as he imagined Neil finding him sound asleep, taking off his shoes, and pulling up the covers to his neck. He couldn't help but wonder if Neil's fingers ever accidentally grazed his skin as he laid the blanket on top of him...but then he remembered how he snored when he slept, and how he must have drooled...Before he could think about it much further, he scrambled out of bed and noticed Neil's textbooks and notebooks gone, surely taken with him for the study group. Maybe he could catch the tail end of it, if he was lucky.

He stumbled through the hallways, still kind of waking up, with his bag slewn over his shoulder and his clothes untucked and ruffled. He was almost running down the hall to get to the common room on time.

When he got to the common room doors, he could hear Charlie's booming voice through them. Todd's shoulders relaxed. *They're still there.*

He knocked on the door timidly, and he wondered if anyone could even hear him, but luckily Charlie opened the door; Todd saw everyone huddled around the common room table and Neil in the center, his face flustered and a hot red.

"Anderson! Speak of the devil." Neil dug his face into the palm of his hand.

"You were...talking about me?"

"Oh, only good things, of course--"

"We were just--uh--wondering if you were going to wake up in time," Neil interrupted, trying to avoid certain disaster.

"Oh." Todd could tell something was weird. Charlie was obviously up

to something, but he had no idea what. All he could tell was that it had to do with making Neil embarrassed--and for some reason, that had something to do with him. “Okay…well, are you guys still...studying?”

“Yeah, guys. *Are* we still studying?” Cameron grumbled. Todd looked at him, confused. He must have missed a lot while he was sleeping.

“I think I’m done, actually,” Neil said, grabbing his things.

“Hey--Neil, where are you going?” Charlie asked.

“I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

Charlie stepped forward to block him from leaving.

“Hold on. Come on, Neil--you know we’re just playing--”

“I said I’m *tired,* Charlie. All right?” Neil looked up at Todd, who was still frozen in confusion. His face started to burn again. “I’m leaving. You can stay if you want, Todd.”

“I probably missed all the good parts anyway. I’ll come with you.”

“Good idea. I think we’re all pretty wiped, actually,” Charlie said with a smirk. “You boys go on ahead.” Neil rolled his eyes.

“Wait--I’m not done!” Cameron squeaked. Knox jabbed him in the side. “*Ow.*”

“Come on, Todd.” Neil stumbled out of the common room with Todd following behind. Neil’s long legs were carrying him quickly down the dim hallways of Welton, and Todd could hardly catch up with him. He didn't look back, either; not once. Todd could tell from the scarce look from the side of Neil’s face that he was still embarrassed about something. He couldn’t even look at Todd.

“N-Neil…?” Todd whispered. No response. He just kept walking. “Neil.”

“What?”

“What happened back there?”

“Don’t...don’t worry about it. It was nothing. Charlie was just getting on my nerves. Nothing new.”

“I’ve never seen you act like that before.”

“I’ll get over it eventually.”

That was the end of it. Todd didn't dare ask anything else, and Neil refused to say anything more. They just walked quietly back to their rooms, and when they got inside, Neil changed quickly and quietly and was in bed before Todd even changed into his pajamas. Neil didn't move a muscle, either; he just faced the wall and didn't speak a word.

“Uh, Neil…?”

“Yeah, Todd.”

“Good night.”

It was silent for a second, then, softly, Neil spoke: “Good night.”

With that, Todd could fall asleep.

Chapter 2: someone he can't have

Chapter Notes

> This one is kind of short but I just wanted to introduce bi disaster Charlie Dalton whom I love with all of my being.

Charlie had whispered it, nice and quietly, in Neil's ear: "you're in love with Todd." He could tell Neil understood it. Accepted it, even. He didn't expect Neil to react like that, though. It was like his head was going to implode. Then, he said something back, something that hadn't left Charlie yet. "I'm not the only one crushing on someone I can't have." Charlie had just brushed over it, naturally. Kept hounding him about Todd. Avoiding any and all doubt.

That one statement, though...it lingered. *I'm not the only one crushing on someone I can't have.*

What the hell did Neil Perry mean by *that?* Charlie was obnoxiously honest about his crushes; well, maybe not all of them. He had his fair share of lady crushes, but there were a select few men that caught Charlie's eye, too. He never fought this instinct, or tried to push it down, but it wasn't necessarily like he could act on it. Especially not in a place like Hellton. It would be too obvious. With Neil and Todd, they were so quiet that even if they had sex you could hear a pin drop. No one would notice. Charlie wore his heart on his sleeve; open for all to see, but also vulnerable. More vulnerable than anyone else thought.

Neil was always the one who could figure out what Charlie was feeling before Charlie realized it himself. He always knew when Charlie was up to something by just a change in his tone or a shift in his posture. A true actor notices those mannerisms, he guessed. Or he was just too comfortable with him. Charlie knew then that Neil must have picked something up that he hadn't figured out. He wanted to talk to him about it more, but Neil dipped out at the last second. To make matters worse, Neil seemed to be avoiding him. They went through every class period, even Keating's, without one word spoken or once glance stolen. It was slightly infuriating.

Of course, Charlie could figure Neil out, too. He was always ten steps ahead. The thing about Todd was that it wasn't new by any means. Neil had been crushing on Todd since the first month or so after he met him, but *especially* after that whole fiasco with Todd in Keating's

class, with the truth blanket and the madman and all that. It was like Neil's whole center of gravity shifted. He just hovered toward Todd more than usual. Charlie could pick up on things, too. He wasn't a complete idiot.

Who *was* it? What was he not picking up?

Now that he thought about it...maybe there was *someone* ...

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It was a few weeks ago, and Knox was all dressed up. Like an idiot, mostly. A pompous idiot. He was dressed this way for a girl, of course. Not just any girl, though: *Chris.* God, if Charlie had a dime for every time he heard the name "Chris" lately, he'd be a rich man. Well, rich*er.*

"And where do you think *you're* going?" Charlie was strewn out on his bed, sunglasses sitting nicely on top of his hair, looking up from his book, and there Knox was, standing there with his white polo tied around his neck and sunglasses on his head just like Charlie's.

"I'm going to the pep rally."

"Since when does Welton have *pep* rallies?"

"Not *Welton*, dummy." He smacked Charlie with a pillow, knocking off his sunglasses.

"Oh, you're *asking* for it, Overstreet."

"You mess up my hair, Dalton, and you're dead--!" Charlie smacked him in the chest, hard. "Okay, *okay!* I'm going to the high school where Chris goes. There's a pep rally over there."

"So *that's* why you look like that."

"Why? What's wrong with how I look? Is it my hair? Do I have something on my face?" Knox immediately turned around, desperate for a mirror. Charlie watched him as he combed through his hair for the millionth time and looked for food in-between his teeth. He watched Knox closely, and then he swallowed.

“No, Knoxious. You look…” Knox turned around to look at him. “You look…” Charlie sifted through all the words he *wanted* to say, and settled on a completely different one. “You look absolutely... *moronic*.”

“*Fuck you.*” Knox grabbed the pillow off his bed and smacked Charlie across the face again.

“Hey--! You know, it’s *okay*. I’m sure she has a thing for morons.”

“Charlie, I’m *serious*. I’m being serious here.”

“I know you are. And honestly Knox, you should know by now that I’m *never* serious.”

“Yeah, I know, and it’s fucking *annoying*.” Knox looked at himself in the mirror again. “Sometimes it would be nice if just once you could be genuine. Just *one* time.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. I can be serious. I’m just not serious *all* the time, like you.”

“I’m not! Hey, I’m *not.* I do all kinds of dumb shit with you. I always go along with whatever idiot prank you have next, and I do it without complaint. Whenever I try to be serious with you, it’s like you’re allergic to it.”

Knox had a point. Charlie hated to admit it, but he had a point. In some ways, Charlie was allergic to sentimentality, to being genuine, to being serious. He never really understood why. Maybe it was because being serious meant things being real. You can’t lose things that aren’t real.

“Okay. I can be serious.” Knox glared at him. “Honestly! I can be. I’m serious right now. Okay. 100% serious.” He waited for Knox to respond. He stared at Charlie for a second, then crossed his arms.

“Go ahead.”

“Knox, you look...you *do* look like a moron, but...I think Chris--or anyone, really...would be lucky to have you.”

“You’re serious?”

Charlie sighed, and looked at Knox’s anxious face. He stared into Knox’s eyes for as long as he could.

“Poet’s Honor.” The look on Knox’s face almost made it worth it. The being genuine part. Seeing him walk out the door, though, made him regret it.

Knox was one of his best friends, and he *wanted* to be genuine with him. He *wanted* to be honest. But he couldn’t be honest--because if he *was*, he would tell him that he didn't want Knox to go out to find Chris. If he was honest, he would tell him not to ever talk about her again, to never speak her name, to never have her name even come into his head. If he was honest, he would tell Knox that he even though he looked like a moron, and he *was* a moron, he had a thing for morons, and he had a thing for him specifically. He would say that he hoped Chris would never look his way. That she would break his heart into a million pieces and he could be the one to put them back together.

No, he didn't want his heart to break. He wanted it to be whole.

He just wanted it to belong to *him*, not to Chris Noel. What kind of name is Chris Noel anyway, when you’ve got a name like Charlie Dalton?

Chapter 3: snowflakes in his eyes

Chapter Notes

> there is no way that the dead poets society boys didn't at one point have a snowball fight and totally fuck each other up. i'm just bringing it to the people who deserve it.

Todd started to feel extra nauseous the morning he woke up and saw the snow sticking to the ground. It didn't help that he had just woken up from a fresh nightmare, one that left another scar on his heart and another on his brain. Neil was across the room, sleeping soundly in his bed, and all Todd could do was stare at him, trying to not even blink in case he were to disappear. It took a lot of convincing each morning to have Todd realize that Neil wasn't some ghost living in his dorm, haunting him, or that he wasn't going insane. A lot more happened in this nightmare, though; he went back to a time before the first nightmare, when Neil was still alive. He remembered it distinctly, more vivid than his own memories, like he was just watching a film in his head. He was wearing a really nice suit, and his hair was combed nicely. He was with everyone, including Mr. Keating, and they were at the play, the one Neil was in, A Midsummer Night's Dream--the one he was supposed to be leading in a few weeks. He remembered the dream starting off happily as he watched Neil on the stage with a smile so bright that the house lights reflected off his teeth. He remembered it being cut short by an angry father walking through the front doors and making all of the light drain out of Neil like someone had turned off a switch inside his head.

God, Todd could have puked if he saw Neil's father anytime soon.

He remembered the way his father ushered Neil into his car as Todd desperately tried to get his attention. He could see Neil's internal struggle from the outside; Todd knew that he wanted to turn around, that he *wanted* to stay. The pitiful look on Neil's face through the window was enough to keep Todd awake for days. Todd knew, of course, that it was all connected. The dreams. *Everything.* It was all connected. It didn't help that these were obviously events that hadn't even happened yet. The snow was several inches tall in his dreams, and it was snowing big clumps of snowflakes that landed on his face and made it cold and wet; there, the snow had just barely begun to fall, and it was too warm to stick.

Now, though, Todd looked outside his window at the greens outside,

covered in a nice thick layer of white, cold snow that he was too terrified to even step in. He knew he'd have to explain it all to Neil, or he wouldn't let Todd hear the end of it, and he knew he had to come up with some reason why even the brightness of the snow bothered him, or why he still had difficulty falling asleep at night, and he couldn't even think about telling him the real reason why he couldn't seem to focus on anything else but him. He just kept it inside, like he always did, and stumbled through every day the best he could.

"Oh, it's snowing," Neil whispered, still groggy from waking up. He got on his knees on his bed so he could peer out his window; his face lit up into a half-smile as he watched the snow fall from the sky.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

He could feel Neil's eyes on him, like he was trying to figure out what was wrong. He always did that whenever Todd mumbled, or seemed down. He could always feel Neil's eyes pierce through him; it never failed to make him more self-aware than he already was.

"Maybe I'll pelt Dalton with a snowball later."

"You know he'd destroy you."

"I expect it." Neil snickered quietly. "If you team up with me, maybe I can get some snow down his pants."

"I dunno, Neil. I'm not in the mood to get expelled today," Todd replied, using a valid excuse to avoid his desire to stay out of the snow.

"Who said I'd get caught?" Neil fell back on his bed, sneering.

"Yeah, right. You'd get caught and then you'd be on edge all year waiting for Charlie to get his revenge while you're scrubbing the toilets or writing sentences on the chalkboard."

"I can *handle* Dalton," Neil replied, to which Todd scoffed in return. "Ye of little faith! I'll prove it to you. By the end of the day, I'll prove it." Neil sprung from his bed with a new wave of confidence, and strutted over to his wardrobe. "Today's gonna be a cold one," he said over his shoulder to Todd. "I've got to layer up." He grabbed at the hem of his shirt and threw it off onto his bed, leaving his chest bare. "Jesus, it's freezing." Todd could spot each individual goosebump on Neil's neck, and his eyes trailed all the way down Neil's spine, down to the small of his back. He had a small birthmark on the side of his

hip. His mouth lost all ability to speak. His tongue sat idly in his mouth and his body felt numb, but he knew Neil had talked too much; he had to say something in response.

“Uh huh,” was all he could muster. His eyes were trying to make a constellation out of the freckles on Neil’s back as he slowly shifted through all of his shirts.

“Did you get your homework done for trig?”

“Uh…” He couldn’t think about trig. He couldn’t focus on anything. “I...Yes, but I didn't understand it, really.”

“Me neither.” He could hear Neil’s smile through his words.

“Maybe...you and I...could...study together. Tonight?” Somehow Todd managed to string together an invitation. He wasn’t known for being very good at those, let alone with something distracting him. Suddenly, Neil turned around, holding a white button up shirt in one of his hands, still shirtless.

“Oh--! Todd, I would, trust me, but I have rehearsal for the play tonight. I can’t miss it.” Todd tried to keep his eyes on Neil’s, but it was near unfeasible to keep his eyes from drifting down to Neil’s bare chest.

“That’s--okay.”

“No, it’s not--you never ask me to *do* things, and then you finally do and I’m...busy.” Neil sighed, and slid his shirt on. Finally, Todd’s chest felt less tight.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll ask...Cameron...for help.” Todd had no intention of asking Cameron for help, but he had to let Neil know he would be okay.

“I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you. I swear.”

“Okay,” Todd whispered with a smile. Neil turned to the closet and pulled out another shirt, a long sleeve, and pulled it over his head, down his button up. Then, he found another sweater and put it on over that.

“What about *another* sweater?”

“Neil, you’ll sweat yourself to death.” The Welton sweaters were

actually very, very warm, and one sweater alone could make you overheat at a rapid rate unless you were stuck outside in the freezing cold.

“Good point. Just the one, then.” Neil rummaged through the bottom of his wardrobe, and pulled out a stocking cap and a scarf.

“You’re crazy.”

“We’re all a little crazy, Todd.” He wrapped the scarf tightly around his neck and turned around to face Todd, who was still sitting on his bed. “Alright, I’m ready. Let’s go raise hell.”

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Hell was indeed raised, and Mr. Nolan came in like Satan himself with punishments raining down like hellfire. The once sparkling white snowy green by one of the courtyards outside Mr. Keating’s classroom was now eroded with gaping holes of wet grass, and instead of snow angels it almost looked like a crime scene, with bodies made out of snow indents instead of tape. When Mr. Nolan first arrived, it was obvious who was to blame; he saw Mr. Neil Perry drenched in melted snow and a flushed but smiling face, then Mr. Todd Anderson, who was standing nearby, hiding his hand still frozen from the snow, Mr. Meeks, Mr. Pitts, and Mr. Cameron standing around the courtyard watching and exchanging money, and then his eyes hit Mr. Knox Overstreet and Mr. Charlie Dalton on top of each other--he remembered Knox’s wide, shocked eyes as he pushed Charlie off of him.

“Perry. Dalton. Overstreet. In my office. *Now!* ”

“Yessir,” Neil whispered.

One right after the other, Neil, Charlie, and Knox followed each other out of the courtyard and down the several quiet halls of Welton as Pitts, Meeks, and Cameron watched from behind, snickering. Todd started blowing into his clasped hands to keep them warm, then trailed far enough behind them as not to be caught by Mr. Nolan. As Neil walked, he knew in the back of his head that his father would chide him and he knew he would probably regret it later, but then, staring at the pile of snow in Charlie’s jacket hood melting slowly

made him chuckle under his breath. He remembered the feeling of throwing the clump of snow he had scooped up and, with his old baseball pitch, felt the chill on his fingertips as he flung the ball toward Charlie's head, and, with a thump, the snow crumbled all over Charlie's head, dripping all the way down his neck and into his clothes.

He remembered Charlie letting out a barbaric "Yawp!" and going right after him, making snowballs and pelting them at Neil's head. They ran around the green like two kids playing tag on the schoolyard, and eventually Knox joined in, helping Charlie roll up snowballs out of the still loose but workable snow piles. Todd watched from a distance, hovering around Meeks, Pitts, and Cameron as they made bets on who they thought would win, but he didn't have any change in his pockets to bet, or else he'd bet on Neil, even though he was technically one against two. He knew Neil would like it if he helped him, but he felt like if he took one step into the snow it would paralyze him, like living his nightmares in real time, and then he'd look like an idiot, standing completely still in the cold snow, not moving at all. He decided he'd just watch, maybe give a few cheers of encouragement.

The game of tag had turned into a game of war, with Charlie, Knox, and Neil all behind the cover of bushes, trees, and other shrubbery, shouting insults and battle cries. Suddenly, Neil decided to crawl toward the bush Charlie was hiding behind with the intent of a sneak attack so brutal it would shut Charlie's trap for good. When he turned the corner, however, no one was there--and then out of nowhere, another "Yawp!" escaped Charlie Dalton's mouth as he jumped on top of Neil's back, pushing him down into the snow headfirst. Todd watched as the three boys beside him groaned and went to exchange their coins, but he couldn't just watch Neil as Charlie dug his fingers into Neil's hair and pushed him deeper into the snow. His feet seemed to move on their own as he snuck around to avoid Knox's line of sight, grabbed a fist full of snow, crept around Charlie's back, and shoved the snow into his face.

"Todd, you motherfucker--I can't see!" Now free, Neil jumped up quickly, grabbed some fresh snow, and quickly thrusted it down Charlie's pants, just like he had promised. "Neil, if you just touched my dick, I swear to *god* I will end you!"

"Run!" Neil grabbed Todd's wrist and they ran away quickly, leaving Charlie stumbling around, trying to rub the snowflakes out of his eyes. Then, he started to run, too, trying to listen to Neil and Todd's footsteps in the snow.

“You two are *dead!* ”

“Charlie, watch out--!” Before he could change course, he ran straight into Knox, knocking him over onto his back. “*Jesus.*”

“Who am I on top of?”

“Dammit, Charlie. Hold on.” Knox took his chilled fingers and gently rubbed the last bit of snow out of Charlie’s eyes. “Better?” Charlie smiled as he looked down on Knox’s flushed red face.

“Much better now.” It was taking everything in him to not just lean down quickly and peck Knox’s slightly parted lips as he struggled to breathe.

“Okay--get off. You’re getting me all wet.”

“Oh, am I?”

“*Charlie.*”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t planning on getting you wet. It wasn’t on the itinerary.” Charlie smiled.

“Guys! It’s Mr. Nolan!”

“C’mon, Charlie. Get offa me.”

“Fine, fine.” He had started to crawl off, but Mr. Nolan was a fast walker, and walked in almost immediately. That was when he found Charlie hovering over Knox in the snow, their faces close enough to feel each other’s breath.

“*Dammit!* Get *off!* ” And that was what Knox shrieked when he shoved Charlie away from him, leaving them both lying on their backs in the snow.

“Perry. Dalton. Overstreet. In my office. *Now!* ”

+

Todd stood outside of Mr. Nolan’s office for a good thirty minutes just pacing back and forth. Meeks and Pitts and Cameron split pretty early

on so they could catch up on their homework (and to avoid any chances of getting in trouble), but Todd decided that he had to stay. He was involved, too, and he wanted to be there as soon as Neil came out. The hallways were eerily quiet while everyone remained outside during free time, and Todd's thoughts were the only thing he could hear. His mind was almost like a broken record, just playing the dream from that morning over and over until it made Todd feel nauseous again. Between that, Keating's latest lecture, and Neil's possible punishment, Todd's mind was anything but quiet.

Luckily, his deep line of thought was cut off abruptly by the slamming of Mr. Nolan's office door. First was Knox, who stormed away in a rush, then Charlie, who tried to catch up to him, and then Neil, who exited last.

"Have you been waiting out here this whole time?" Neil asked when he saw Todd, who was sitting on the floor against the wall.

"Uh, yeah." Neil held out his hand, and Todd took it with a smile as Neil pulled him back up on his feet. "I was kind of responsible, too, so…"

"One snowball doesn't make you guilty." For someone coming out of the Dean's office, Neil seemed to be in a good mood. He had a small, sly smile on his face, and he kept his hands dug deep into his pockets. "But it was pretty badass."

"I don't know about that…" Todd could feel his face flush, and he immediately turned his head out of habit. "You did pummel Charlie, though."

"Not without your help." Neil tried to catch Todd's eyes, but his shy friend would absolutely not look at him, not even as he stared intently at the side of his face. He could see, though, the light red shade on his cheeks and ears. He couldn't help but smile in return. "Thanks for saving me, Todd."

"It's nothing." Todd turned his head finally and looked right into Neil's eyes. They stared at each other for a long, solemn moment, before Todd realized they were standing right in the middle of the hallway. "Wait, so what did Mr. Nolan say?"

"Oh, you know Nolan. He just stared at us for a good fifteen minutes with a grumpy look on his face and then told us that we're supposed to be mature students and not rolling around in the snow like schoolchildren."

“Is that all?”

“I’m sure he had more in his head he wanted to say, but he didn't.”

“He really just let you off that easy?”

“Todd, my friend, we hit a stroke of luck.”

When they reached their room, Todd leapt onto his bed and let his head sink into his pillow while Neil started changing into less wet clothing.

“I have to head off to practice, but I’ll see you later, okay?” Neil pushed his tie up to his neck and looked at himself in the mirror.

“Okay.” Neil went to grab for the door. “Hey, wait.”

“Yeah?”

“If you didn't get in trouble, why was Knox so huffy when he left Nolan’s office?” Neil stood there for a second, thinking, then opened the door.

“Honestly?” He stood in the doorway. “No idea.”

+

“What *was* that, Charlie?”

“What are you talking about?”

Knox had annoyingly long legs, and he was strolling down the hallway as fast as he could, leaving Charlie struggling to keep up. He kept looking forward, never turning back, but kept asking questions which Charlie could barely hear.

“You *know* what I’m talking about.”

“No, Knox, I don’t.”

Knox stopped abruptly, and turned around to face him.

“Knock it off, Charlie. Stop acting so oblivious.”

“Do you really want to discuss this in the middle of the hallway?”

Knox looked around for a second at all the boys staring at them and knew Charlie was right. Then he bolted off, Charlie in tow, and found their way to their room. Charlie entered first, took a seat, and Knox stormed in behind him with a swift slam of the door.

“Okay. Now we’re alone. Talk.” He stood there, arms crossed, with his grumpy face which made his chin droop.

“Talk about what? The weather?”

“Dammit, Charlie. The snowball fight. Why were you acting like that?”

“What--you’re mad at me?” Charlie liked playing games like this with Knox. He liked seeing his face get all red and flustered. He liked slightly annoying everyone. This time, Knox’s face wasn’t just flustered. It was beet red, more on the angry side and less embarrassed. “You *are*. You’re *angry*. ”

“Can’t you understand why?”

“No. I don’t get it. Why don’t you explain it?” Knox huffed, then moved in closer, leaning against his wardrobe.

“You tackled me.”

“On accident! I couldn’t see.”

“Oh, *bullshit*, Charlie. You could see just fine. There were just a few snowflakes in your eyes. You just like making a big spectacle of everything. Everything is just a *show* for you.”

“Don’t even act like you didn't have fun. I didn't ask you to join, you know. You could have ran off like a pussy just like Meeks and Pitts, but you didn't. And you had *fun!*”

“Maybe at first.”

“Knox, babe, don’t say that.”

“And *stop calling me babe*!” Knox hit his fist against his wardrobe, making it shake. “I *hate it* when you call me that.”

“Why? Why does it bother you so much? Why don’t you ask yourself that?” Charlie jumped off his bed and walked right up into Knox’s

face. “I know what your problem is, Knox. You got mad because Nolan might have thought we were gay because we were on top of each other and that *bothers* you. That’s your problem. You give too much of a damn of what people think of you. If you’re not gay, it’s not a problem! It’s either that, or you actually *liked* me being on top of you and you actually *like* me calling you babe and that bothers you even more. So which one is it?” Knox stared into Charlie’s eyes for a second, then let his head drop.

“You’re an asshole, Charlie.”

“You can go on as many dates with Chris as you want, Knox. You can put on a show, too. I won’t judge.”

“*Fuck you*, Charlie.” Knox’s hands gripped Charlie’s shoulders and threw him across the room into Charlie’s wardrobe. “*Fuck* you.”

“No, fuck *you.* You do *not* have the right to get mad at *me* because *you* can’t handle your own damn feelings.”

“I don’t--have--I like *Chris*!”

“Then *why* does it fucking matter?”

“I don’t *know*.” Knox took his head in his hands. “I just--you embarrassed me, all right? You made me look like a fool in front of Mr. Nolan.”

“I didn't know you gave a shit about Mr. Nolan.”

“I give a shit about not getting expelled.”

“You were *not* going to get *expelled.* We were fucking around in the snow, not starting a war.”

“I know you don’t care about me whatsoever, Charlie, but I’d rather avoid getting in trouble altogether.” Charlie slumped up against his wardrobe.

“You think I don’t care?”

“I know you don’t care.”

“Wow. Okay.” He sighed, then took in a deep breath. “I do care about you, Knox.” His head bobbed up, and he looked into Knox’s confused, dull eyes. “The thing is, I don’t know if you care about *me*.”

“Come on. Of course I do.”

“Do you? Honestly? Because to me it looks like who I am seems to bother you.” Knox was silent for a second, just staring into Charlie’s saddened eyes. “So maybe...I should just be myself somewhere else.”

“Charlie.” Charlie pushed off of his wardrobe, grabbed his books, and walked toward the door. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Neil will let me sleep on the floor.”

“Come on, Charlie, don’t--” He went to grab Charlie’s wrist, but Charlie pulled his hand away. “Don’t go.” Charlie looked into Knox’s eyes, then down at the ground.

“Fine.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.” Charlie dropped his stuff, then plopped down on his bed face first. He didn't move for hours, and Knox just sat on his side of the bed, going over the day in his head over and over and thinking about what Charlie said.

“Charlie?” It was late in the evening, and Charlie hadn’t moved for a while. “You awake, Charlie?”

He didn't make a sound.

Chapter 4: making things cold again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Knox woke up the next morning, Charlie Dalton was still in the same position as he had been the previous night, facing the wall, arms scrunched up, not moving at all. He knew he overreacted last night. It was that post-anger self-awareness that you get when you realize you acted like an asshole. He shouldn't have yelled, he shouldn't have got mad, he shouldn't have pushed him, literally and metaphorically. Knox knew it would bother him for the rest of the day, but Charlie never stayed mad for long. He knew that Charlie would be a little sour with him for the rest of the day, that he would either give him the silent treatment or be even more obnoxious than normal. Either way, he'd suffer it and make no complaints. He owed that to him.

"Charlie," Knox whispered, putting his hand softly on Charlie's arm. "Charlie, wake up. It's almost eight." He let out a small, guttural groan and dug his head into his pillow.

"Go away."

"You're going to be late."

"I *said* go away." His voice sounded nasally, slimy, like a child who doesn't know how to blow his nose. Knox had younger siblings; he knew what a cold sounded like. He sighed, then slid his hand onto Charlie's forehead. "What are you doing?"

"You're warm. Really warm." He was so warm that it was like putting his hand against an open flame.

"You can say it, Knox--I'm *hot.* " Charlie turned his head slightly, revealing a sly smile. Still the same old Charlie, even sick.

"Charlie, you have a fever." Knox took a seat at the end of Charlie's bed. "I'll tell them you're sick, but you should really go to the nurse."

"I don't *want* to go anywhere. The bed is...too comfy." He pulled the covers up to his neck as he shivered.

"You're definitely out of it."

“What, more than normal?” Charlie took a deep, sniffly breath, then exhaled. “You should go. So you don’t…catch anything.”

“Do you need me to get you anything?”

“No, *Mom.* I’ll be fine.” Knox stared at him for a second. He knew that Charlie was facing away from him to avoid spreading any germs, but he couldn’t help but think that he might still be mad at him, even with the sly comments and jokes.

“Okay. I’m going. Feel better, all right? I’ll be back later with some soup or something.”

“If Neil says anything about this, shut him for me, will you?”

“Sure thing.”

Knox lingered for a second in the doorway, his hand lightly gripping the doorknob, and watched Charlie for a second as he twisted and turned in his bed. He would be fine when he came back later, surely, and he’d be just as annoying as usual, but there was something in his chest pulling him back in the room, something that made him feel like he should do *something.*

“I can feel you staring at me, Knoxious. Go to class.”

Knox, silent, caught one last glance and closed the door behind him.

+

Neil wasn’t able to say anything about Charlie’s demise because he didn't show up, either.

Todd had told them all about it. When he woke up from another nightmare, there Neil was, sweating through his sheets and drooling onto his pillow. Todd had woken him up, felt his forehead, and let him go back to sleep, knowing no good would come out of getting him up. Knox noticed that Todd’s eyes were dark, droopy, like he hadn’t gotten any sleep at all. He wondered how long he was actually awake for. The rest of the day was boring without a Charlie or a Neil to keep them entertained. Meeks and Pitts droned on about their radio. Todd stayed silent, as usual, and almost fell asleep once or twice. Cameron

kept asking about the homework for the next day, and Knox chimed in here and there, just to keep the conversation going, but honestly, his mind was elsewhere.

He couldn't tell if he was thinking more about Chris or about Charlie, and quite honestly he couldn't tell if he wanted to know the answer. He started reciting the poem he wrote for Chris in his head, just to keep his thoughts straight:

The heavens made a girl named Chris

With hair and skin of gold.

To touch her would be paradise.

He felt his cheeks flush, and he recited the poem again, and again, and again, til he didn't have to think about it.

The heavens made a girl named Chris.

The heavens made a girl named Chris.

To touch her would be paradise. To touch her...

"You okay, Knox?" He realized his eyes had been closed the whole time. He opened them, and everyone was gone except Todd, leaning over him, his eyes even darker and baggier up close.

"Are *you* okay, Todd?" Todd's lips turn into shy, sad smile.

"I've been better. I haven't been getting much sleep."

"Yeah, we can tell." He went to grab his books and catch up with the rest. "What's the deal with that?"

"I keep having these...n-nightmares." Anyone could tell with a glance how bad the nightmares bothered him. It was like his whole body recoiled as he remembered them.

“I get nightmares sometimes, too. And sometimes, I can’t move. Is that it? Are you having sleep paralysis and scared to go to bed? I used to be like that, too.”

“N-No. Not that.” He sighed. “I--don’t tell anyone, okay? It’s...weird.” Knox walked with him as they walked toward Keating’s class. Todd took a deep breath and looked down at his books as he walked. “I keep having these nightmares about Neil. The same ones, over and over. And sometimes they’re a bit different, but it’s like it’s in chronological order. And it’s sometime in the future.” His eyes strain, like he’s trying to remember every detail, but it hurts. “He... *dies* ...every time.”

“Goddamn.” He takes a breath. He couldn’t imagine having a dream about someone dying every single night without fail. “How?”

“What?”

“How does he die?”

“Oh.” Knox could tell Todd didn't want to talk about it. He shouldn’t have said anything. He doesn’t expect him to say anything, but Todd spits out: “He shoots himself.”

“Shit.” He *definitely* shouldn’t have said anything.

“It’s after he stars in the play. His dad yells at him, and drags him to the car. Last night, though--” He grimaces. “The nightmares always cut off before then. I didn't know h-how he died before. But last night--” He stopped in his tracks right before they got to Keating’s classroom, looking more scared than ever. “Last night I *saw* it.” Knox caught a glimpse of the goosebumps rising on Todd’s forearm. “It’s like I was a fly on the wall, right outside the window of his dad’s study. And I kept p-p-pounding on the window…”

“Todd, Knox, are you joining us today?” Mr. Keating’s head popped out of the doorway.

“Yes, Captain.” He looked down at Todd, whose head was still drooped. “It’s just a nightmare, Todd. Neil is fine, I promise. And we’ll make sure nothing bad happens to him, okay? You *need* to sleep, Todd, or you’ll shut down.”

“You sound just like Neil.”

“Well, he’s a smart guy.” Knox smiled and patted his arm. “Come on,

let’s go read some goddamn poetry.”

+

When class was over, he grabbed some soup from the kitchen after dinner (he was friends with some of the cooks back there) and headed back toward the dorm, expecting Charlie to be exactly in the same position as he was when he left him, groaning and spewing sly comments like a leaky faucet. When he arrived at the door, he knocked three times.

“Charlie, are you decent?”

He didn't want to walk on him half-naked. Then, he sat there in silence as he waited for the expected response (something like “No, but come on in” or “depends on what you mean by decent”) but received nothing in return. He knocked again. “Charlie?” Nothing. He must have been asleep, so Knox gripped the doorknob and walked inside, but to his surprise, Charlie’s bed was empty. “Oh.” His head spiraled with all of the different places Charlie could be. Did he listen to Knox’s advice and actually go to the nurse? Or, did he do what Charlie does and not listen to anything at all? The latter was definitely more likely, but he hoped Charlie had more sense than that.

He walked all the way to the infirmary, which was on the other side of the school, the soup slowly getting colder and colder with each step.

When he got to the infirmary, there were several beds and hospital equipment and partitions just like walking into the public hospital. It was his least favorite part of the whole building. Walking in gave him shivers like he had just walked into some haunted place. For a split second, he wondered if anyone had ever died there.

“Can I help you, Mr. Overstreet?” He always found it weird that all the nurses knew his name, but he didn't know them.

“Uh--is Charlie Dalton here? Or did he leave already?”

“Leave?” She chuckled. “The boy’s here, alright, but he’s not going anywhere, that’s for sure.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked at him for a second, then motioned to Knox for him to follow. She walked down the row of white hospital beds to one covered by a partition.

“Mr. Dalton, you’ve got a visitor.”

She pulled back the curtain, and there was Charlie, sweaty and miserable looking.

“Oh, did you get the memo? I’m dying.”

“You’re not dying, Dalton. You’ve got the flu.” She looked over at Knox. “Is he always like this?” Knox gulped as he watched Charlie turn in his bed.

“Unfortunately.”

“Don’t get too close to him, alright. Leave the soup, say what you need to say, then I suggest you go find another room to sleep in tonight.”

“Wait, why?”

“Just to be safe, to air out all the germs.”

“Oh.” The nurse turned back to Charlie before leaving.

“Don’t strain yourself, Dalton. I’ll be back in a bit.” Her high heels made a klick klack noise against the tile of the infirmary as she walked away, leaving Knox and Charlie by themselves. Knox left the soup on the side table where Charlie could reach it, then sat down on a nearby bed, a short distance away.

“I brought you some soup.”

“I can see that.” Charlie sat up slowly, groaning, and grabbed the bowl. “Thanks.” He took the spoon and took a bite. “It’s a little cold.”

“I’m sorry, I tried to keep it warm.”

“Oh, did you?” He smiled. “That explains it. You don’t have a good track record at keeping things warm.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know,” Charlie said, smirking, “taking things that are warm and good and turning it cold and bitter.”

"*I* make things cold and bitter."

"Yes, as of late."

"Are we arguing about this again?" Knox sighed and leaned back into his seat. "I thought we'd be done with this. You're sick, and honestly *I'm* sick of having this conversation." Charlie made an obnoxious slurp with his soup. "I was an ass, okay, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have freaked."

"You *were* an ass." Charlie peered into his eyes for a second. "But I forgive you...this time."

"'This time'?" Knox laughed.

"There'll probably be a 'next time.'" They sat for a second in silence when the nurse walked back in.

"Mr. Overstreet?" Knox started to get up, knowing he was probably getting kicked out, when the nurse spoke again. "You have a call."

"I do?" He was surprised. No one ever called him. "Who is it?"

"A girl by the name of Chris Noel." Another obnoxious slurp caused Knox to turn his head back around at Charlie. "Do you want me to...tell her to call back tomorrow?"

"No!" Knox's head turned so fast he almost got whiplash. "No. I'll get it. Thank you." He turned once again to face Charlie, who wouldn't look at him. He just stared into the red bowl of soup, swirling the spoon around in a circle. "Charlie--I'm...I'm gonna go, okay?"

"Ha. There you go, making things cold again."

Knox sighed.

"I don't want her to hang up."

"Of course not." Charlie sighed again, and looked up at him with a sad smile. "Carpe fucking diem, right?"

"Carpe diem." Knox smiled for a second, let his hand slip off the chair, and turned around.

"I'll be back. Don't die while I'm gone."

"No promises." He coughed extra loudly for dramatic effect. That was

Charlie Dalton for you. Knox laughed, his head getting dizzy at the thought of Chris Noel's voice on the other end of the phone. His feet moved so fast that his head could hardly keep up.

The heavens made a girl named Chris.

The heavens made a girl named Chris.

To touch her would be paradise.

Yesterday, it all seemed like a fantasy. Here, now, as he grabbed the telephone receiver and put it up to his ear, he felt for the first time in a long time that maybe--just maybe--he would have a chance. He could hear her breath on the other line, and his heart started pounding so hard he thought he would have a heart attack and die, right there. *What a poetic way to die.*

"Hello, Chris?"

"Knox, hi." Her voice sounded just as cheery on the phone as it did in real life. "I'm glad I caught you." *She's glad she caught me. If only she knew.* "Listen, Chet's parents are going out of town this weekend and he's having a party. Would you like to come?"

"Would I like to come to a *party?* " He could almost hear Charlie's voice whisper in his ear, *say yes.*

"It's Friday, around seven."

"Well, sure. That's great. I'll be there, Chris. Friday night at the Danburry's."

"I'll see you there?"

"I'll see you there. Bye, Chris."

"Bye, Knox."

He hung up the phone, and as he looked all around to the empty corridor, he let out a barbaric *yawp* that he was certain Charlie could hear all the way up in the infirmary. He smiled, ear to ear, and sunk into the wall, his head racing a mile a minute.

Charlie. He stood for a second, and raced back to the infirmary.

When he got back, he saw the nurse walk over to Charlie, who was laying in his bed shivering. The bowl beside him was empty besides one or two drops of soup. The nurse carefully took the blanket and pulled it up to Charlie's neck, tucking him in. Knox stood back, but the nurse caught his eye.

"I--I'm going."

"That's alright, Mr. Overstreet." She walked back toward him. "He'll be okay."

"I know. He's...stubborn."

"And strong." She looked back at Charlie and smiled. "You're lucky you've got yourself such a friend."

"Yeah." Knox could feel his cheeks get warm. "I am."

"Goodnight, Mr. Overstreet."

"Goodnight." He started walking away, but he couldn't help but look back at Charlie, like he had to make sure he was okay before he could really leave. He was cold, and sick, and weak, but he was still Charlie. Charlie forgave him, and Chris had called him. His heart felt like he could burst. Instead, he made his way down to Meeks' room.

+

Knox was laying on the ground in Meeks' room, a spare blanket covering at best his leg to waist area. The cold couldn't bother him, though. His mind was anything but quiet as he stared at the bland ceiling of Meeks' room. Pitts was fast asleep--snoring, too, but even *that* couldn't bother him. Knox could tell that Meeks was anything but asleep, probably kept awake by the piercing snores that came out of Pitts' nose every five seconds.

"Hey, Meeks?" Knox whispered.

"Yeah, Knox?"

"You know about like, dreams, right?"

“Dreams? I guess. My mom liked to tell me about how to interpret them.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you told me that once.”

“What about them?” Knox shifted on the uncomfortable flat ground and looked at Meeks, who still had his glasses dangling down his nose.

“Todd keeps having these recurring nightmares.”

“Yeah, Neil told us he’d been having trouble sleeping.”

“Well, what does it mean when you keep having dreams about someone close to you…dying?”

“Like who?”

“Can’t tell. I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“So…Neil.” Meeks laughed and pushed up his glasses. “Who else could it be?”

“I’m not at liberty to disclose that information.” Knox smirked and leaned his head against his propped arm. “So what does it mean?”

“Death of a loved one can mean several different things. Internal conflict, fear of loss, something ending…” He sighed. “He could be having nightmares of Neil dying because he has anxiety about him.”

“Todd has anxiety about everything.”

“Well, maybe he’s worried about Neil’s relationship with his father. Or his own feelings for him.”

“You think Todd has feelings for Neil?”

Meeks pushed his glasses all the way down to his nose.

“You *don’t* think Todd has feelings for Neil?”

Knox went over it for a second. They were always near each other, and sometimes Neil would lean on him. Neil *was* pretty persistent about Todd being in the Dead Poets Society. Todd would always talk about him when he wasn’t around, he’d always sit closest to him at meetings, he would always ask for his advice…Neil was the only one he’d trust with his writing…

“Now that I think about it, it makes sense.”

“And I’m almost 100% positive it’s reciprocated.”

“Yeah…” Knox fell back onto the floor. “I don’t know how they just have it figured out so easily. Just knowing who you’re meant to be with.”

“What do you mean? Don’t you have a thing for that Chris girl? What was that poem you wrote? *The heavens made a girl named Chris…* ”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Knox felt his cheeks flush. “She called me, you know. Chris.”

“No kidding?”

“She invited me to a party at Chet Danburry’s house on Friday.”

“You know that she’s... *going* with Chet Danburry, right?”

“I know.” He let out a deep sigh. “But she was thinking about me.”

“Knox, you put the hopeless into hopeless romantic.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Of course you’d take that as a compliment.”

“Good night, Meeks.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” Knox turned to look at Meeks again. “You know, Knox, Sometimes the person you’re meant to be with is the person you’d least expect.”

“That’s an interesting theory...maybe I should ask out Chet Danburry.”

“Wouldn’t that be something. Good night, Knox.”

Knox sat and thought about it for a good, long while, and he knew that it was idiotic of him, entirely mornoic, but he knew that he would regret not trying. Chris Noel was beautiful, kind, smart, all wrapped into one. And *she* called *him.* It would be even more idiotic not to try, at least. Then, maybe then, he’d listen to this ‘person you’d least expect’ business, but even then, how do you know it’s the person you’d least expect? How do you know?

He closed his eyes until he fell asleep, and when he fell asleep…

...he dreamt of Charlie Dalton.

Chapter End Notes

i'm a sucker for the "sick lover that you have to take care of" trope so of course i had to put it in this one :) also you can ignore the fact that i'm not entirely sure how to spell chet's last name.

Chapter 5: the world's first unmanned flying desk set

Chapter Notes

you know i had to do it to 'em

Maybe there is a God, because Todd woke up the morning of his birthday on his own accord, not to Neil shaking him awake as the result of another repetitive, disastrous nightmare. In fact, he didn't dream at all; the previous night was peaceful, a calm nothingness that left his mind free to think about anything. He went to class with his head empty for the first time in weeks.

Keating’s lesson that day was a lesson about the dangers of conformity and about trying to be like everyone else. It wasn’t anything anyone had ever taught them before; in truth, Todd thought the other teachers at Welton were probably *trying* to teach them how to be like everyone else. They were truly taught that being different was not the way to go about living life; it would just make it more difficult. Todd thought that it at least had some truth. Being different was definitely harder, but he could try all he wanted to push down how he felt about certain people, or try to act the same as everyone else, and he would always know deep down that he was nothing like them.

He watched as Neil strutted around the courtyard with his head held high toward the sky and without fear. Todd naturally kept his head down and tried to step on every other brick in the ground.

Eighteen didn't feel any different. He wished it would.

He watched as Neil stopped for a second, closed his eyes, and let a ray of sun wash over his face. Todd couldn’t help but think: *he looks like an angel.*

He quieted his mind once more, and let his head droop back down into its natural place.

+

“She invited you to a *party? ”*

Knox’s smile was ear to ear as they walked from the courtyard back to the common room for a study session.

“What can I say, Neil. The ladies want me.” The whole group chuckled slightly. “What? They do.”

“Sure they do, pal.” Meeks slapped a hand on Knox’s shoulder. “Sure they do.”

“*She* called *me.* Doesn’t that mean something?”

“Sure it does,” Neil chimed back in. “but she’s not asking you on a date. She’s asking you to go to her *boyfriend’s* party.”

“But she *called* me. She *actively* sought out my presence.” The others sighed. “She was thinking about me. That means something.”

“You’re in denial.” Charlie said, finally speaking up. “You said it yourself--Chris is practically engaged to Chet Danbury.” Knox’s head turned back quick, catching Charlie’s stern eyes.

“We’re in high school. That doesn’t mean anything.”

“So what makes the *two* times you’ve spoken to her mean something?”

Todd didn't know for sure what was going on between the two, but there was always this odd point of tension. He could see Knox tense up, with the vein in his neck tightening like he was trying to hold himself back. Charlie was quiet for a second, and it was obvious he knew that he had said too much.

“Maybe,” Todd whispered for the first time in the whole conversation, “Knox should go to the party so he can figure out if Chris has any feelings for him, or if she was just being nice.” The other boys all turned to look at Todd, who in turn clutched his books tighter and darted his eyes.

“I agree with Todd,” Neil added, watching him. “There’s nothing wrong with going and scoping it out.”

“Exactly.” Knox turned his head at Charlie, who gave him a brooding stare. “Thank you, Todd.” Todd gave a small smile in return, and let his mind wander while they talked.

He wondered if he should have told them about his birthday. He didn't really like being fawned over, like he was something important. His parents never treated a birthday like it was anything special. Maybe when he was little, and birthdays were more like a show than a requirement, and he had an older brother who was fun and could play with toys with. When he got older, a birthday just turned into every other day that required a present that one could buy easily and without thinking about it, and perhaps a cake and a pat on the back. He was used to it that way. No point in getting your hopes up.

Besides, if he told them now, they would feel bad for not getting him anything. For not knowing. For not throwing him a party.

“Todd, you coming?”

Todd’s head shot up, breaking up his thoughts. Neil was behind them, waiting for him.

“Yeah, I’m coming.”

Neil stood there for a second with a smile as Todd caught up to him.

“So, Todd…You, uh, know we’re your friends, right?”

The question caught Todd off guard.

“Y-Yes, I know that.”

“And you know you can talk to us, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I just…I understand being shy and all. I just don’t understand why you’re so quiet with *us.* ”

“Oh.”

“I’m not--I’m not saying it’s a *bad* thing. I just…want to understand it better.”

“I guess when it comes down to it…” He wasn’t sure how to answer, exactly. No one ever questioned him about *why* he was shy. His parents never really were that interested in him, let alone ask him such things. “…it’s probably a confidence issue.”

“You don’t think you have anything important to say?”

He shrugged.

“Or that I’ll get something wrong.”

“Todd. You really think we’re not interested in what you have to say?”

“I know it’s irrational, Neil, but I can’t help it.” Todd muttered. “It’s just how I’m wired.”

“Well, we can fix that, can’t we?” Neil replied pleadingly. “I, for one, am incredibly interested in what Todd Anderson has to say.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No,” he said sternly. “I mean it.” They walked for a little longer in silence as they watched the rest of the group turn the corner down the hallway. “Todd...you’re one of us now. You always have been. You don’t have to feel like you have to impress us, you know?”

“I know.” He looked up at Neil, trying to show with his eyes how much he meant it. Neil just nodded, smiled a little, then started walking faster.

“Let’s catch up with them, yeah?”

Todd’s cheeks felt so warm they could heat up the whole room. He tried to look away, but he was almost positive Neil caught a glimpse. *Oh well,* he thought. *Let him look.*

+

Neil left for play practice around five, saying he’d be back after dinner. The play was only a few weeks away, and he left for practice almost every day. Acting was most definitely Neil’s passion; he always looked excited to leave and always looked just as excited when he got back. Todd could feel it from the way he talked about it when they sat down at dinner or when they were laying in bed at night. He always talked about the logistics, about his character, about the set, but Todd always wondered what it was like acting with other people. Were those people Neil’s friends? Did Neil think of them as his other friends? Did he hang out with them after practice?

He realized he never really asked Neil that much about his own life; the only information he got about Neil was from Neil's stories or Charlie's. Neil never bothered to ask Todd that much about his family, either.

Maybe he just knew families were touchy subjects; almost everyone in Welton had a family member that made their lives miserable. For Todd, it was almost everyone: his mom, his dad, his brother, everyone. For Neil, it was mostly his dad. Everyone could tell Neil's dad got under Neil's skin, but Todd knew better than to ask. Neil had only ever snapped at him a few times, and the one time that stuck out was when he was pestering Neil about asking for his dad's permission. He knew he should have kept his mouth shut.

When he got back to his room after dinner, there was a gift laying on his bed. He recognized the wrapping paper from home. He had to admit, he wasn't expecting a present. It was a nice surprise. When he picked it up, it felt light; once he had an acquaintance from his old school who got a Christmas present and it was wrapped to look like it was something big, but it was actually just a large box with a car key inside it. Todd wasn't one to get his hopes high; but he was finally eighteen, finally an adult, finally able to do whatever it was he wanted. He wanted to have his own car, able to drive wherever he wanted, to roll down the windows and scream the lyrics to all his favorite songs, to drive his friends around and go get milkshakes on a hot sunny day and not have to worry about asking for a ride or being judged. He yearned for a taste of freedom, and in his blind hopefulness he tore apart the parcel to find a desk set.

Just a desk set. No keys.

The same desk set as last year.

Of course.

He laid it on his bed gently, the plastic squeaking just a little as it rubbed against his quilted comforter. He crumpled up the wrapping paper in his hands and threw it down on the floor. He took the heel of his shoe and dug into it before throwing it in the trash. He kept his head in his hands, staring at the pencils and scissors that he was just as disinterested in last year. He knew he'd have to send his parents some kind of card, or call them, but he hated the idea more than he hated his desk set.

He didn't want Neil to see him so angry, so upset. He grabbed the desk

set in haste and walked outside into the cold, snowy night and found himself on the overpass from one building to another and stared at the ground beneath them before sliding slowly down to the ground. He let his fingers slide across the plastic surrounding his boring, unwanted gift, and sighed.

Boring and unwanted. Just like me, he thought, and closed his eyes and let the coldness wrap around him. He could hear the sounds of footsteps across the stone but he blocked it out, until the footsteps got louder, and closer.

“Todd?”

Todd’s eyes shot open to the sound of Neil’s familiar voice. He was standing down a few feet away, covered in his big blue and red coat and holding his script in his hand. He walked closer, folding the paper and putting it in his pocket. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Todd mumbled back.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Todd brought his knees up to his chest, and wrapped his arms around them. Neil’s eyes found the gift lying beside him, and he felt the need to explain. “Today’s my birthday,” he said, knowing that would spark discussion.

“*Is* today your birthday?” Todd nodded, avoiding Neil’s direct gaze. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“What did you get?” He asked, motioning toward the desk set.

“My parents gave me this,” Todd explained.

“Isn’t this the same--?”

“Yeah.” He was surprised Neil had noticed those small details. “They gave me the same thing as last year.”

“...Oh.” Todd could feel Neil’s pity in the pits of his stomach, but somehow he knew that Neil understood. He was sure Neil had his fair share of unwanted gifts, of undeserved criticism, of unachievable expectations.

“Oh,” Todd repeated.

“Maybe they thought you needed another one.” Neil’s laugh could bring him out of the pits of any and all despair, he knew then. That’s another thing about Neil that Todd loved: he could always make him feel better.

“Maybe they weren’t thinking about anything at all,” Todd added, laughing along. “The funny thing is, about this, I-I didn't even like it the first time.” There was Neil’s laugh again, making his heart jump.

“Todd, I think you’re underestimating the value of this desk set.” He leaned forward, and pulled the desk set up into his arms. “I mean, who would want a football, or a...baseball…”

“Or a car,” Todd whispered, thinking about earlier.

“Ah--or a car, if they could have a desk set as wonderful as this one.” He turned it around, studying it. Occasionally his eyes darting back to meet Todd’s, who were glistened with confusion, and admiration, and adoration, and love-struck awe. “If I were ever going to buy a desk set... *twice* , I would probably buy this one. Both times.” Todd chuckled, letting his head sit up high and be brushed up against the cold breeze. “In fact, it’s shape is…” Neil positioned the desk set vertically, looking over it. “...it’s rather….aerodynamic, isn’t it?” Todd’s mouth was stuck in a permanent smile as he brought himself up to his feet. He knew what Neil was up to. “You can feel it.” He walked over closer to the edge, near Todd, and let the desk set jump off his fingers like he was going to throw it. “This desk set wants to fly.” He looked over at Todd, who stared at him in disbelief. “Todd.” He handed the desk set over to him. “The world’s first *unmanned* flying desk set.”

Without hesitation, Todd hurled the desk set as hard as he could across the courtyard, papers flying everywhere like the snow that fell in his nightmares. He was silent for a second as Neil laughed.

“Oh my,” he heard Neil say over the sound of all the clatter. “Well, I wouldn’t worry. You’ll get another one next year.”

It was then he wanted to kiss him, with nobody around but them.

“How old are you now, Todd?” Neil asked.

“Eighteen,” Todd whispered, watching the moonlight shine into Neil’s eyes.

“Hey, you’re older than me.” He smiled at him, his teeth as white as

the stars. “That doesn’t feel right.”

He could just lean in, do it quick, run away far from Hell-ton and live a life in the trees. All he wanted for his birthday was one kiss on Neil Perry’s lips. But he couldn’t ask. And he couldn’t steal one. So he just walked back quietly and tried to imagine what it would feel like. *Heaven,* he thought, *like Knox’s poem* .

When he got in bed, it was like he forgot that nightmares even existed. His eyes closed quicker than they ever had, and he didn't think about what cruelty he might see when he let sleep take him.

In retrospect, he should have.

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It wasn’t the first time Todd had that nightmare, but it hurt even more the second time.

He shot up out of bed, sweatier than if he had been thrown into a wildfire, but petrified, like he had seen a ghost, with a loud scream along with it. His whole body felt like it was in motion, like little ripple effects all over him. His head was still in the dream, terrified and hopeless and numb.

He remembered pounding on the glass, but nothing worked. He remembered screaming, and nothing worked. He tried to get up, to run, to find help, but he was stuck in his spot. He couldn’t even turn his head to look away.

The images just flooded into his head, and he screamed, and screamed, until Neil came up to him and grabbed him by the arms.

“Todd,” he whispered desperately. “Todd, it’s me. It’s Neil. You’re okay.”

Neil’s face was bathed in the early morning blues and looked just like it had through the window’s glass. Todd stared at him for a second, dumbfounded, and whispered, “Neil.”

“I’m right here.”

Usually, he would turn back around, bury his head deeper and deeper

into his pillow to hide away his shame, but this time he wrapped his arms deep around Neil's chest and dug his head into the crook in Neil's neck. He could feel Neil exhale sharply, a bit surprised, and let his hands fall onto Todd's back. His hands were like ice compared to Todd's burning skin.

"Stay here for a while," Todd whispered. "Please."

"Okay," Neil stuttered. "As long as you need me to."

Todd could feel himself already regretting it, but he just shut his mind up and dug his head deeper.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be." Neil replied. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Tell me...something. To take my mind off it." Neil took his hand and dragged it up and down Todd's back.

"I wish you had told me about your birthday," he said, looking out the window at the snow. "I wish I could have gotten you a present. When I was out at play practice the other day, I was riding my bike in town, and I saw this little bookstore." He let his fingers find all of the little bumps on Todd's back, making Todd shiver. "And in the bookstore, I saw all kinds of poetry. A lot of Whitman. Keating would have loved it." He felt Todd laugh a little in his arms. " *You* would have loved it," he added quietly. "I would have gone in there and got you something, if I had known." He sighed. "Maybe I should have anyway."

"You don't have to get me anything," Todd said, pulling back. "I'm fine."

"I know," Neil muttered. "But I want to."

They were silent for a second, staring into each other's eyes.

"I think I'm okay now," Todd said, making sure he remembered every detail about Neil's face.

"You want me to go?"

He nodded yes, but his heart said no. "Okay, then." He got up slowly, his eyes still on Todd's, and sat on his bed. "Good night, Todd."

"Good night, Neil."

He put his head back on his sweat-drenched pillow, scared of closing his eyes. He looked back over at Neil, who was turned toward the wall. He went over his list of good things again.

Mr. Keating's classes. Poetry. The Dead Poets Society. Walt Whitman. The unmanned flying desk set. Neil Perry. The snowball fight. Meeks' study sessions. Neil Perry. Neil Perry. Neil Perry.

Chapter 6: long live nuwanda

Charlie Dalton had a way with words; he could convince almost anyone to do anything and they'd thank him for it. Or he just playfully harassed you into submission. Either way, he got what he wanted, and no one really minded. Knox Overstreet, though, despite hours and hours of arguing, would not be convinced, not even when Charlie pushed his lip out into a pout and got down on his knees, begging. It was truly unavoidable; Knox Overstreet was *going* to that party.

The last argument that day went something like this:

"*Charlie,* I am *going* to that party."

"Yeah, I know, and it's idiotic." Knox was standing by the mirror, once again combing and recombing his greased up hair. "Look at you, you have enough grease in your hair to cook bacon in."

"Now you're just being rude."

"It's my last resort."

"Good, that means you're almost done getting on my case."

"Not even close."

He turned to look at him.

"Can't you just be, I don't know--happy for me?"

"I would be *very* happy for you if you didn't ruin your night on a stupid high school party."

"Charlie, we're *in* high school."

"No, we're in *prep* school. It's a whole other animal, and you know it." He plopped down on Knox's bed, creeping down to the foot of the bed. He propped his head up on his elbows and stared at him. Knox looked over once or twice at him while he was grooming.

"Are you going to call me an idiot again? I'm kind of getting used to it. It's growing on me."

"Don't worry, Knoxious. I'll never stop calling you an idiot." He smiled for a second. "But seriously, you really are an idiot if you go to that

party."

"I made up my mind. It's done. I'm not hearing anything you say." He threw the comb at Charlie's head.

"Hey--not the face."

"If you say anything about the party again, it won't just be your face I fuck up."

"Is that a promise?"

"Damn it, Charlie." He sat down on Charlie's bed. "Fine. You get...two minutes. Say whatever you've got in that stupid brain of yours and then leave it be."

"Two minutes?" Charlie pulled his legs around to face him. "Okay. I'm going to take advantage of the fact that you don't know how long two minutes is and you don't have a watch on." Knox sighed, and crossed his arms.

"Go. Start. Begin."

"First of all, Chris Noel is not your girlfriend."

"I know that--"

"Uh uh. No interrupting." He sighs. "Where was I? Oh, right. Chris Noel is *not* your girlfriend. She's dating someone else. Someone who could almost definitely beat you to a pulp and make sure your face is not *nearly* as handsome as it is right now in this moment." Knox's face stiffened for a second, his jaw clenching. "You want something you can't have, and trust me, I get it, but you can't just go out and make a fool of yourself for this girl who doesn't even think twice about you--and before you even say it I know that she called you but she's not doing it because she's secretly in love with you. And I'm not saying she's toying with you. I don't know this girl. But I do know that she will be at this party with Chet Danburry and you will go and see them and she won't spend another second thinking about you because she'll be in some bedroom having *sex* with Chet Danburry and you'll be sitting on some random couch watching people make out and think *why did I even come here* and *I should have listened to Charlie* and then you'll start drinking like an *idiot* and then stumble back home wasted and crying and apologizing, whimpering *you were right,* and I'll say *I told you so* while I hold back your greased up hair while you puke and cry and whine."

Knox cleared his throat, obviously a little moved.

“I feel like that’s two minutes.”

“You’re going to go to that party, and it’s a mistake.”

“Charlie. I’m leaving.” Knox stood, adjusting his coat and tie and took the comb through his greased hair one more time.

“I’m trying to help you.”

“I appreciate that, Charlie, I really do. But I have to figure this out for myself.”

“Knox, please.”

Knox gripped the door handle tightly, his head turned slightly to look back at Charlie, who had his hand out like he was going to pull him back.

“Well, Charlie, you’re right about one thing.” He stared at him for a second, letting the tension swell. “I am going to that party.”

“What if you get hurt? What then?”

“I figure you’ll be here, watching me while I puke.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Goodnight, Charlie. Have a good time at the meeting.”

“Yeah. I will.”

He hoped that Knox would stay just a second longer, just to stay staring at him with those beautiful eyes of his, but by the time he had blinked he was gone, closing the door behind him softly. Charlie stopped, sighed for a second, considered chasing after him until he got into the car, but realized, maybe he was right. Maybe he needed to make his own mistakes, and learn from them. He just hated, *hated* the idea of him getting his hopes crushed. He grabbed his jacket, and his hat, and looked at himself in the mirror, hoping maybe he’d see Knox combing back his hair. Instead, it was just him.

Knox looked good, handsome. His face looked warm, and his smile was bright. He only hoped that they wouldn’t chew him up and spit him back out.

Come back in one piece, Overstreet, he thought. *That's an order.*

+

The Dead Poets Society meeting started as normally as ever, albeit colder.

All of the members were wearing layers upon layers with the breath escaping their mouths looking like a cloud of smoke erupting from their lungs; Neil had his hood hanging over his head like a monk. Todd kept the time as Neil started their meetings with their usual poem, promising to "suck all of the marrow out of life" while shivered in the freezing cold air.

Suddenly, while they finished reciting the poem, there were sounds of high-pitched laughter that could have only belonged to two women. Todd looked up at Neil with confused eyes, and Neil looked just as confused but curious at the same time.

"Oh my god," Cameron stammered. They all shone their flashlights on the entrance of the cave, waiting to see who would soon be stumbling in.

"Is this it?" They heard one of them say. Todd could catch a glimpse of blonde hair as the dark figures made their way into the cave.

"Yeah, this is it!" The boys all looked at each other and scoffed; of course, it was Charlie. What did they expect? "Go ahead. Go on in, it's my cave. Watch your step." The girls came in one at a time; one girl had red hair and wore a red shirt with a coat, and the other had blonde hair, with a black shirt and a blue jacket. Pitts, scrambling to get up, knocked his head off the top of the cave.

Todd watched as Neil hesitantly made his way toward the front of the cave, his face still frozen and pale with awkwardness.

"Hey, guys," Charlie said, stumbling in. He looked awfully cheery, finally getting over his previous illness and wanting to cause some trouble. "Meet, uh...Gloria, and…."

"Tina."

"*Tina.*"

The boys all stared at them like they were wild animals, something majestic to behold. Neil looked like he had just seen a ghost, but he was the closest, lingering near Charlie.

"Charlie, what are you doing?" Neil whispered in Charlie's ear. "What about Knox?"

"Who's Knox?" Tina asked.

"Nobody, hun," he teased. "He's not cool enough to be in the presence of you lovely ladies." He looked back at Neil. "Don't worry about it, Perry." He turned his head back to the girls. "Girls, this is the pledge class of the Dead Poets Society."

They all said hello in response.

"Alright, guys, move. Move! It's Friday night! Let's start the meeting, huh?" The boys grabbed their things and moved around, making room for the girls. "Guys, I have an announcement to make. In keeping with the spirit of passionate experimentation of the Dead Poets, I'm giving up the name Charles Dalton." He looked down at the girls, who were looking up at him in awe, like he was some kind of god. "From now on, call me 'Nuwanda.'"

Pitts and Meeks laughed, leaning forward.

"*Nuwanda*?"

Tina went to apply more lipstick onto her lips, but Charlie swiped it from her hand, then applied it onto his cheeks, one line at a time.

"Death to Charles Dalton. Long live Nuwanda."

+

Chet Danburry's house was so full, it was bursting at the seams with people. Knox could hardly get to the front door. His eyes darted to every girl with almost white blonde hair, but none of the girls at all resembled Chris Noel. When he finally got to the door, he hesitated for a second, unsure whether to knock, open it, maybe make his way around back, or just turn back, give up, leave. He swallowed his

thoughts and pushed the door open.

“Hello? Hello, Chris?” He pushed his way through, looking for her everywhere. He checked his hair in every mirror he could find.

“Knox! You made it!” He heard her angelic voice from the other room, and there she was, looking just as beautiful as ever. Her hair was so pretty, he wanted to just drag his fingers through it. She came up and grabbed his scarf, pulling him along. “Did you bring anybody?”

“No.”

“No? Ginny Danburry’s here. Look, I have to go find Chet.” His heart dropped into his stomach a little. “Why don’t you go downstairs? That’s where everyone is. Make yourself at home.” She started making her way up the stairs, leaving him down at the bottom, watching her ascend, with people pushing by him in pairs.

“Yeah, but Chris, I…”

She didn't even look back down at him, while he was left standing, mouth gaping. He looked around, and he couldn’t recognize anybody. He didn't know anybody. He was in a foreign land, left to fend for himself. He could start to hear Charlie’s degrading voice in the back of his head, and he realized almost immediately he needed some kind of alcohol to drown it out.

He made his way to the kitchen, walking through couples making out almost anywhere you could make out with someone, in a corner, on the couch, on the sink, against a wall, everywhere. He had to admit, as someone who had never been kissed, it was interesting to watch them all. He wanted to imagine himself kissing Chris Noel, but all he could see was her kissing Chet Danburry.

Alcohol. He needed alcohol, ASAP.

God, Charlie was right. He could tell already, and he hated it. He hated that Charlie was always right. He always knew what he was thinking, he always knew what was going to happen, like he was a fucking clairvoyant.

Ten minutes later, he saw Chet and Chris dancing in the living room, and Chris was smiling like she was the happiest she had ever been. He wondered what it would be like to be the cause of a smile like that. He took another sip of his drink, and he liked the burning in the back of his throat.

That burning hurt just a little bit less than the subtle cracking of his heart.

+

“Are we gonna have a meeting, or what?”

Charlie took his cigarette and put it up to his lips, inhaling, then exhaling smoke. His face was in a constant smirk, and Neil could tell something was up.

“Yeah,” Gloria chimed in, “If you guys don’t have a meeting, how will we know if we wanna join?”

“*Join?* ” Neil turned his head to look at Todd, who shrugged in response.

“‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely, and more temperate.’” Charlie leaned into Tina, who was leaning against the cave. Tina was obviously infatuated, giving in to every word and eating it up like it was honey dripping off his lips.

“That’s so sweet.”

“I made that up, just for you.” Neil rolled his eyes, and looked over at Todd, who, along with the other boys, laughed quietly.

“You did?”

“I’ll write one for you too, Gloria.” He made his way over to Gloria, who sat on the other side of the cave. “‘She walks in beauty like the night.’” He stops, like he’s thinking it over. “‘She walks in beauty, like the night…of cloudless climes and starry skies. All that’s best, dark and bright, meet in her aspect, and her eyes.’” Gloria was under his spell, too, almost closing the gap between their mouths if it weren’t for all of the people watching their every move.

“That’s beautiful,” she whispered. Neil started chuckling, too, with the rest of them, and looking back at Todd, who seemed to be enjoying himself.

“There’s plenty more where that came from.”

+

When he got to his third drink, the whole room started spinning. It reminded him of the old fair rides he would ride with his siblings, where they would sit in tubs and they'd start spinning. He remembered puking then, too, and he knew he would later. There were blobs of red everywhere, from letterman jackets to helmets to face paint. It was like looking at a wall of red as he stumbled to the couch and found the only spot not covered by some random stranger or couple making out.

It was then that he noticed her; Chris Noel, laying on the couch, her head and blonde hair right up against his thigh.

The heavens made a girl named Chris.

With hair and skin of gold.

To touch her would be paradise.

Here was his chance, his shot as his own, personal paradise.

"God, help me," he whispered. He looked over at Chet Danburry, who was sitting at a table across the room with the other blobs of red, presumably getting drunker than Knox was. He looked back down at Chris, who truly looked more like an angel up close. "Carpe diem," he whispered, gulping. He drank the last drop of his drink and took a deep breath. He took his fingers and dragged them across Chris's stunningly perfect hair, with a finger or two brushing up against her delicate unblemished skin. Feeling daring, he leaned down slowly and pressed a soft kiss against her forehead. *Paradise.*

The rest was a blur, but the next thing he knew he was on the ground getting clobbered by Chet Danburry.

He could hear Chris telling him to stop, but he didn't. Blow, after blow, after blow, he laid on the floor and watched as Chet Danburry hovered over him punching the daylights out of him. *Charlie was right,*

he thought. *Of course.*

When he finally pulled away, Chris made sure to check on him.

“Chet, you hurt him!”

“I’m sorry,” was all Knox could muster. “I’m sorry.”

He couldn’t hear much after that because of the prominent ringing in his ears, but he could hear Chet’s booming voice yell: “Next time I see you, you die.” With blood streaming down his nose, and Chris’s head buried deep into Chet’s shoulder, he knew better than to stick around.

Charlie was right. I never should have come.

+

Neil Perry was not a stranger to alcohol, but he wasn’t expecting to be handed a bottle of some by a random girl in a cave. He looked over at Todd and Meeks, who smiled at him, and Cameron, who made a neck cutting motion with his hands, but Neil just smiled, thinking *carpe diem,* and took a nice swig. The back of his throat burnt, but it was worth it.

“Me and Pitts are working on a hi-fi system,” Meeks said, breaking the tension. “It shouldn’t be that hard, to, erm, put together.” The girls seemed uninterested, to say the least.

“Yeah. I might be going to Yale,” Pitts added. “Uh-but I might not.”

Neil gripped his nose with his fingers.

“Don’t you guys miss having girls around here?” Gloria asked, sitting under Charlie who had a cigarette dangling out of his mouth. The boys nodded, said “yeah,” and looked down at their feet. Charlie sat up a little.

“That’s what this club is about. In fact, I’d like to announce…I published an article in the school newspaper in the name of the Dead Poets demanding that girls be admitted to Welton.”

The mood in the cave changed fast, switching to untameable awkwardness to anger and confusion, starting with Cameron, of

course.

“You did *what?* ”

“You didn't,” Neil spat.

“Now we can all stop beating off,” Charlie joked.

“How did you do that?” Neil asked.

“I’m one of the proofers. I slipped the article in.” Everyone looked down, groaning. “What? It’s not like anyone knows who we are.”

“This is serious, Charlie.”

“It’s Nuwanda, Neil.”

“That’s right, it’s Nuwanda,” Gloria repeated.

“Don’t you think they’re going to ask you who wrote it? They’re going to come to you and ask what the Dead Poets Society is.” Cameron stammered anxiously.

“Are we just playing around out here, or do we mean what we say?” Charlie asked, taking another drink. “If all we do is come out here and read a bunch of poems to each other, what the hell are we doing?”

“This could mean trouble. You don’t speak for the club!”

“Hey, would you not worry about your precious little neck?” Charlie asked, stepping closer. “If they catch me, I’ll tell them I made it up.”

“Genius plan, Nuwanda. I’m going.”

“The meeting’s not over, Neil.”

“I don’t care. I’m leaving.”

“So am I,” said Cameron, standing up quickly. “I’m not going to get in trouble for something that Charlie did without our permission.”

“Come on guys, stay a little longer.” Neil shook his head and walked away toward the end of the cave. “*Neil.* Cameron. Come on.”

Charlie followed them out, leaving behind his alcohol and crushing his cigarette into the cave floor. They were already outside by the time Charlie grabbed onto Neil’s coat sleeve.

“Look, Charlie, I understand you’re upset about Knox going to that party, but you’re going to get all of us in trouble.”

“You think I’m upset about Knox? I haven’t thought about him all night.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. That’s exactly why you brought two girls and a bottle of alcohol to distract you. You don’t *want* to think about him.”

Charlie’s head dropped.

“You act like I’m the only one. I for one find it odd that even though the boy wakes up every morning screaming out your name you don’t think he has feelings for you.”

“He has *nightmares,* Charlie. Nightmares about me *dying.*”

“That means something, Neil! Damn it, he loves you, can’t you tell? He *screams* your name, he cries, he can’t sleep for months on end because he *loves* you. Okay? The guy *I* love is out there trying to get it on with the first girl he laid eyes on! It’s not my fucking fault that you have no spine and won’t tell Todd how you feel. Let me put you out of your misery, huh?”

“Do *not,* Charlie. I mean it.” He sighed. “Knox’ll be back any minute and you can find out how it went. Why don’t you tell those girls to go home?”

“Wow, you really are into Todd. You didn't even look twice at those girls.” Neil looked away.

“I’m going to bed. See you tomorrow when you’re sober and less of an ass.”

“I’m not drunk. I’m maybe a little tipsy.”

“Whatever you say, buddy. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Neil.”

+

When Knox finally made his way back to Welton, the world had

finally stopped spinning. The lights weren't quite so bright, and the colors had shape instead of blobs. He still stumbled everywhere he walked, but at least the world had stopped attacking him. Welton was dark, the only light coming from the moonlight shining through the windows. He made his way down the halls, peeking around corners to make sure no one was there to catch him and give him a hundred demerits for going out, for getting drunk, for being an idiot. He deserved all of them.

When he entered his room, he half expected Charlie to attack him with questions, but instead he was laying on his bed, his head popping up when he heard the doorknob turn.

"Knox?"

"Hey." He stumbled forward until he found his bed. The feeling of his head on his pillow was that of pure heaven. Charlie leaned forward and switched on the lamp by his bed, illuminating the room. There, on the other side of the room, was a drunk and dazed Knox Overstreet, his face still covered in dried up blood.

"Knox. Your face." He slid over to Knox's side of the room, to get closer. "Jesus. Someone beat the shit out of you."

"You have lipstick on your face." Charlie's fingers went up to his cheeks, remembering.

"Long story. Come on. Let's fix you up."

"What time is it?"

"No clue." He walked over to the mirror and looked at himself; the lipstick he had applied a few hours earlier was now smudged all over his face. When he looked back at Knox, he was turned over to face the wall. "Would you mind telling me who did this to you?"

"Chet...Chet Danburry."

"God, Knox." He found a cloth in his closet and walked back over to Knox's bed. "Sit up." Knox sat up and looked into Charlie's eyes as he pressed the cloth against Knox's face, cleaning up the dried blood under his nose and around his chin. "Why...if I may ask...did Chet Danburry clobber you?"

"I...uh...I kissed Chris. Only on the forehead. But I did. And he saw." Charlie stopped for a second and looked into Knox's eyes.

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Was it everything you’d dreamed of?” Knox’s eyes drifted down to the lipstick on Charlie’s cheeks, down to his lips.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?"

“You were right. About Chris. About everything.” He looked back up into Charlie’s eyes. “All of it.” Charlie sighed, then started pressing the cloth back into Knox’s face. “Aren’t…aren’t you going to say ‘I told you so’?”

“I told you so, Knox. I really did.” Charlie pulled the cloth away. “But at least you had the guts to go after what you want.”

“What about you?” Knox whispered, leaning in.

“What, is that a challenge?” Charlie threw the cloth down to the floor. “Because I accept.” He placed his hands on Knox’s neck tenderly, and Knox’s eyes fluttered shut, and then Charlie leaned in closer, placing kisses from his neck up to his cheek. He could smell the alcohol lingering in Knox’s mouth. He pulled back for a second, and Knox’s eyes opened up wide.

“Why’d you stop?”

“You’re drunk, that’s why.”

“You’re drunk, too.”

“No. Just a little tipsy.”

“Me, too.”

“Knox, you’re *fully* drunk.”

“Well…I *fully* want you to kiss me.” Charlie stopped for a second, taking Knox in completely.

“You don’t mean that.”

“You said it yourself, Charlie. I’m just pretending.” Knox’s hands gripped Charlie’s shoulders, bringing him closer. “What if you were

right?”

“I’m always right.”

“Exactly,” Knox whispered, his lips getting closer and closer to Charlie’s ear. “So kiss me.”

“*You* kiss *me,* then, if you’re so sure."

Without hesitation, Knox planted his lips on Charlie’s, with his fingers coming up to Charlie’s chin; Charlie’s face was soft, almost as soft as Chris Noel’s. He let his index finger drift across Charlie’s lipstick stains. He almost slipped his tongue into Charlie’s open mouth, but Charlie stopped him before he could.

“We should just stop there.”

“What?”

“You should go to bed before you realize you’re making a mistake.”

“I wouldn’t think that.” He leaned in for another kiss, but Charlie’s hand flew up between their mouths, blocking him. “I’m confused,” he said, leaning back. “I thought you *wanted* to kiss me.”

“I do. But I’d like it even better if you were sober.”

“You liked it?”

Charlie smiled wide, teeth and all.

“Yes, I liked it, you idiot.” He sighed, trying to remember the feeling of Knox’s lips on his for as long as he could, and pulled away. “Goodnight, Overstreet.”

“Charlie, wait. Come back.”

“We both need sleep, or we’re getting kicked out of Hager’s class in the morning.”

“*Fuck* Hager.”

Charlie fell back on his pillow and stared up at the stars through his window.

“You know, I like drunk Knox *much* better than sober Knox.”

He was cut off by the sound of Knox snoring heavily in the bed beside him. “Goodnight.” And with that, he fell into the deepest and soundest sleep he ever had.

Chapter 7: a call from god

Chapter Notes

prepare for some aNGST i'm sorry

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mr. Nolan, it's for you! It's God! He says we should have girls at Welton!

Neil could have shit his pants, right then and there. They were in the main hall, all sitting in their pews and watching as the oldest men in the universe all sat at the front of the room, griping. Welton was never going to allow girls at Welton, not until God himself came down from the heavens and demanded it himself. Even though he was surrounded by other boys, Neil was cold, his arms covered in goosebumps and terrified to the core. To make matters worse, Todd's worry and anxiety about the situation oozed over onto him. Not to mention Cameron, whose tension he could feel from yards away. It was like he was a vacuum, sucking up everyone else's worries and spitting them back up. He could feel Todd's worried stares in his peripheral vision, but he didn't want to break composure. He didn't want the whole hall to know that he was about to fall apart.

He didn't have it as bad as Charlie, though.

They all sat in the hallway as they waited for him to get out of Nolan's office, and they swore they could hear the smack of the paddle against Charlie's rear end every single time. Neil watched Knox's face get more and more pale and tense with each *smack* that rang through the halls.

"Goddamnit, Charlie," he thought he heard Knox whisper under his breath.

Todd looked at him with sad eyes, and Neil gave him a sad smile back.

When the smacking stopped, they all looked up at each other, and then with a *creak* of the office door, they all scrambled onto their feet. They kept their eyes on the end of the hall until they heard the familiar *squeak* of shoes against the linoleum getting closer and closer until Charlie Dalton's ghost-white and tear stained face appeared.

As he walked by, their heads all drooped, trying to avoid eye contact,

as he walked past them. Neil could tell that he was walking with just a little bit of a limp. When he got to the door, Neil knew he had to be the one to ask the questions everyone else was wondering, but he didn't truly want to pry. Charlie had been through enough.

“You kicked out?”

“No,” Charlie whimpered with a trembling voice.

“So what happened?”

Charlie let out a long sigh, like he had been letting out all of the breath he had been holding.

“I’m to turn everybody in, apologize to the school, and all will be forgiven.”

“So what are you going to do?” He got no response, and instead Charlie shuffled further into his room.
“Charlie--!”

“Damn it, Neil.” He watched as Charlie turned to look back at him with fresh tears staining his cheeks and flooding his big eyes. “The name’s *Nuwanda.*”

All he could do was let out an exhale of relief as Charlie closed the door behind him.

+

With that settled, Neil Perry could go to play practice with an unburdened soul; he wasn’t sure if he did his best acting with something on his mind or nothing on his shoulders. He liked not having to worry about things, and to give in to the art, to the words...to, like Mr. Keating said, let the words drip from his tongue like honey. He liked everything about acting, from the costumes, to the poetry, to the dialogue with other people...but the thing he liked the most was being able to take off the mask he wore every day in order to please his demanding father, and put on another one, become someone completely different, someone he didn't even recognize. At Hell-ton, you would do anything humanly possible to escape.

When he rode his bike to practice, he let his hair blow in the breeze, and let the warmth from the golden sun beam down on him. *So that's what freedom feels like.*

+

Knox wasn't sure where to start when he knocked on the door.

Charlie, I need to talk to you about last night, he could say, or maybe, *I need to talk about my feelings.* No. That didn't sound right, either.

When he woke up that morning, his head hurt like a bitch, first of all. Then, memories flooded back to him in distinct, painful waves. First was his walk back from the Danburry's, drunk and tilting and almost falling into traffic. Then, with an extra pounding of his head, he remembered stumbling into Welton's halls and somehow evading the guard dog or anyone with working ears. For an hour or so, he couldn't remember anything past that, but when they were in Hager's class before the assembly (trying to hide his obvious hangover), he remembered the last bit of the puzzle. All he could see in his mind's eye was Charlie sitting in front of him, wiping away the blood which stained his cheeks. Charlie looked so calm, so serene, with lipstick on his cheeks and a smile which warmed his heart. After that was Charlie leaning in and kissing from his collarbone up to his cheeks. He had to tilt his head down in class because he was getting so flustered. He could barely look Charlie in the eye.

I fully want you to kiss me, he remembered saying. But Charlie didn't kiss him; *he* kissed Charlie.

His fingers dragged along the chapped lips which, the night before, had been pressed against Charlie Dalton's. He tried desperately to hide his pleasure, which was burning on his cheeks. Though he had been drunk, he didn't forget the feeling of warmth all over his body, all the way from his cheeks to his toes. He didn't forget the way Charlie's kisses made his head spin even more than they already did. It was like he was experiencing it all over again in the middle of Hager's trigonometry.

Now, though, as he stood in the doorway of their room, Charlie Dalton looked pitiful, lying on his bed and drying up his tears.

“Charlie…?” He wasn’t sure if Charlie would answer, or if he would tell him to go away, but he had to say something. “Can I come in?”

“It’s your room,” he said, sniffling. “so yeah.” Knox hesitantly walked in and sat down on his own bed, but Charlie didn't even look over at him. He just sat, staring up at the ceiling, taking his sleeve and wiping his eye every few seconds. “I can feel you staring at me,” was all he said.

“I’m trying to think of what to say.”

“What, you’re not going to yell at me?”

“No, I’m not going to yell at you. What’s done is done.” He sighed. “About yesterday--”

“Look, I know what you’re going to say.” Charlie sat up, suddenly, and looked at him. “I’m not in the mood for beating around the bush, so I’m just going to tell you straight out. I wrote that damn article for the newspaper and brought those girls to the meeting because of you, because you went to that damn party at the Danburry’s, and I was jealous. Alright? Maybe if they had girls at Welton, I’d stop thinking about you all the damn time.”

Knox felt a pang deep down in his chest, right in his heart.

“Maybe I don’t want you to stop thinking about me.”

“You know, you’re really confusing.” He pushed himself back against the wall, and threw his hands up. “One minute, all you can talk about is Chris Noel. Next, you get all flustered when I was on top of you at the snowball fight. Then, you accept a party invitation from Chris. After that, you come see me when I’m sick and bring me soup. And then you go to the party I specifically told you that you shouldn’t go to and then you come back and beg me to kiss you, not to mention that you were drunk off your ass.”

“You were drunk, too.”

“Yeah, and for the same reason. You realized Chris didn't like you, and I realized you didn't like me. End of story.”

“That’s not why.” Knox looked down at his feet; he couldn’t dare look him in the eye as he admitted it. “I got drunk that night because I realized…I realized I’d rather kiss you instead.” He exhaled, then, and lifted his head. “And that scares me.”

“Why does that scare you?”

“Because...because I can’t... *be* this way. Not in the world that I want to be in.”

“You’re scared of what everyone else thinks?”

“Charlie--you don’t get it. I *can’t.* Society doesn’t like….people *like us.* I would never get hired, if they knew, and if they found out, they’d fire me. I can’t have a normal family if I love a man. It would be easier, alright, it would be *so much easier* to love Chris Noel instead.”

“Are you...saying you *love* me?”

“Of course that’s all you would get out of that.”

“Look--life isn’t easy, Knox; never has been, never will be. Why not love who you love and just forget the rest?”

“I can’t *afford* to. You can’t…you can’t just *live* on love alone, Charlie.”

“I can. And I will. If that’s what I have to do.”

“You’re filthy rich, Charlie, that’s bullshit--!”

“--And I won’t take a cent of it. Not if they expect me to be what I’m not.” Charlie stood up, then, and looked at Knox with stern eyes. “I’m not here to live my life according to someone else’s fucking rules. Didn't what Keating taught us make any damn sense to you? Beauty, romance, love--it’s what we stay alive for. You remember that?” Knox lifted up his head, to lock on to Charlie’s passionate eyes that swelled red with tears. “I’d say I love you back if it actually meant anything to you, but I’m sure the others are worried about me--”

But before Charlie could turn around toward the door, Knox rose up from his bed and put his lips back on Charlie’s for the first time since last night, this time completely sober and completely present, completely full of passion and fear at the same time. Charlie froze at first; his mind raced and yet his brain wouldn’t tell the rest of his body to move, to touch him, to kiss back, but then like a switch being flipped, his mind went into overdrive. He wrapped his arms around Knox’s waist, pulling him closer, and pushed him toward Knox’s bed. Charlie had to admit he was surprised when he heard all of the noises Knox was making; it was like he had never touched anyone before. *Maybe he hasn’t,* Charlie thought, *maybe I’m his first.* He was hovering

over Knox, first, kissing him and pulling out Knox's tucked in buttoned down shirt. His hands ventured around Knox's body like he was exploring unknown territory.

"You're an idiot, *Nuwanda*," Knox mumbled when they had pulled apart. "A call from God."

Charlie laughed, and kissed him again.

"It was worth it."

"I think your ass disagrees." Knox laughed that time, and, surprising Charlie, pulled him down so he could maneuver around him, this time leaving Charlie under him. Charlie had already pulled out his shirt when he came back into the bedroom, but Knox went to unbutton each of Charlie's buttons. "How many times did he hit you?"

"I lost count." The tone in the room shifted, suddenly, from heated and passionate to romantic, to solemn and sincere as one of Charlie's thin fingers traced Knox's jaw from behind his ear down to his chin. Knox leaned down slowly and pressed his lips on Charlie's collarbone, then up his neck, to his cheek, to his lips, and this time Charlie let out a small gasp. "You know what you're doing," Charlie whispered.

"I learned from the best." Knox couldn't knock the smirk off of his face as he remembered the night Charlie kissed him down his neck and left him a changed man.

"I thought you didn't remember that."

"I remember *all* of it." Charlie's hand fell back on his face, embarrassed.

"That wasn't my best work."

"Then what *is* your best work?" Knox seemed surprised.

"Maybe I'll show you when my ass isn't out of commission." This time he grabbed Knox and flipped him over once more. "You'll just have to wait until then."

"I've waited this long," he said, letting his fingers trail down Charlie's collarbone. "I guess I can wait a little longer." Charlie took Knox's hand in his and pressed his lips against each of Knox's knuckles. "Charlie….I—"

Suddenly, there were two knocks at the door, which made both Charlie and Knox's hearts stop at the same time. "Oh shit." They scrambled off of each other and Charlie grabbed their pieces of clothing which sat underneath Charlie's own bed, then threw Knox his shirt.

"Charlie? Knox? You in there?" It sounded like Meeks, but they couldn't tell from through the door.

"One second!" Charlie yelled. He threw his shirt on and hastily tucked it into his pants. His fingers, still tingling, could barely button each button as he went from bottom to top. Then, still a little frazzled, went to grab the door. Meeks, with his hand up to knock again, put his hand back into his pocket and swayed a little; though Charlie seemed somewhat healed from his earlier punishment, Meeks treaded lightly. However, Meeks had a keen sense of perception which could not be easily turned off. Charlie's hair was basically sticking up and incredibly messy, his shirt was barely tucked in and wrinkled, not to mention Knox looked flustered and just as messy in the background. He didn't mention it, but his small, knowing smirk revealed to Charlie that he did indeed know what they were doing less than two minutes ago.

"I didn't see a thing," Meeks whispered, with a finger crossing over his heart.

"You're a good man, Meeks." He slapped him on the back and let him in; his heart was calming down, slowly, but with each glance into Knox's eyes, he had his own mini heart attack. *Goddamn, man. You're going to kill me with those eyes of yours,* he thought.

But I wouldn't have it any other way.

+

Play practice was like a whole other world, a universe in itself, and Neil was like the crowned prince.

He had to admit it felt gratifying to sit on the pedestal that everyone else had created for him. His father rarely gave him proper encouragement, nothing in anything he cared about, anyway. At practice, he walked into a full shower and thunderstorm of praise,

with his peers complimenting the way he said a line or applauding something he improvised on the spot. His fellow actors liked how he let the words from his script drip off of his tongue, like honey, and he liked that they liked it. The director acted like she had found a diamond in the rough, a talent that had been swept away out of her reach. Their admiration was like rain after a drought, something that was once missing and now found, and he didn't want to lose it.

That wasn't the only thing he liked about play practice. When he stepped on that stage, costume or not, he *became* Puck. He wasn't Neil Perry, a terrified, cowardly, no good son who had his father's hooks dug into him so deep he could hardly breathe; he was Robin Goodfellow, a mischievous and magical sprite, through and through. Truly, acting came naturally to him. Playing a part seemed like the only thing he ever did, and he was good at it. It was addicting, something that kept him afloat.

It was always sad once practice was over. Neil always left with his coat on and scarf tied around his neck and a deep melancholy which lasted the whole bike ride back to Welton.

But today, he took a different route than he usually did, this time stopping at the bookstore which he had rode past once before. He left his bike against the storefront, buttoned up his coat and walked inside. He immediately found himself in a sea full of books and dirty spines and a smell that he wished he could have bottled up into a candle and kept in his room. He didn't have much time, he knew he had to be back in time for dinner, but the Walt Whitman section immediately caught his eye. Of course, Neil knew, that was where he had to go. He thought Todd would like something old, something rough, like it had lived a life of its own, and so he grabbed a copy of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* , whose spine was almost falling off.

He smiled ear to ear as he went up to the counter.

"Ah, Whitman," the cashier said. He looked older, older than Mr. Keating. His facial hair was grey and spotty, like he couldn't grow one fully. He moved the book over in his hands while ringing Neil up. "This for you?"

Neil shook his head, chuckling.

"Oh, no."

The cashier's eyes darted from the register to Neil's blushing face, and then smirked at him.

“A girlfriend, then?” Neil’s cheeks turned from a light pink to a bright red.

“N-No, it’s….for a friend, is all.”

“Must be some friend.” The cashier winked at him and handed him the dilapidated book. “Life’s too short, kid. Tell her how you feel.” *Gather thy rosebuds while ye may,* Neil thought. *Carpe diem.* With bright red cheeks, he looked down at the book, and thought about how Todd might react when he gave it to him, later.

“Thank you for the advice. I’ll...keep it in mind.”

The cashier smiled at him, and he reminded Neil of his grandfather, a man who was much calmer and kinder than the father which always expected too much. He didn't know him for very long, but he always told Neil that he could do anything, that he could be anything, that he shouldn’t let anyone limit him. He wondered if his grandfather knew that it was his own son that was limiting him. He knew if his grandfather was still alive, it would be different. He’d interfere. At least, he hoped so. So, with the smile at the nice, elderly cashier, he placed the dusty old copy of *Leaves of Grass* in his school bag, let the heavy wooden door of the bookstore slam behind him, then hopped on the seat of his green bike; as he pedaled away, his earlier disappointment was left waning as he rode off into the dimming sunlight.

+

When he got back, Neil rushed as fast as he could up the stairs, past all of the boys on the staircase who were heading to dinner. “Save some for me,” he said with a smile on his face as he patted them on the back. He could feel the copy of *Leaves of Grass* flopping around in his bag, and he was hoping that Todd hadn’t yet left for dinner, that he would still be in his room studying or doing homework so he could give it to him as soon as possible. See, Neil always was very good at keeping secrets; he didn't feel the need to blab about everyone else’s secrets when they told it to him in confidence, but when it came to gifts--Neil was like an open book. Anxious to see their reactions, he would give them the gift almost immediately after he bought it, even if Christmas was months away. He just couldn’t keep it in.

“‘But room, fairy, here comes Oberon!’”

He hoped Todd would be in there to hear him, and he could discuss play practice (what lines he messed up, what parts the director changed, how some of the girls kept staring at him and he pretended like he didn't notice, those kinds of things), but when he opened the door, instead of Todd, he found his own father, sitting at Neil’s desk and staring ahead of him like he had been waiting for him. *God, how long had he been waiting there?*

“Father,” he mumbled, his breath suddenly taken out of him.

“Neil.” There it was, the disappointment. It lingered in his breath like the smell of alcohol. He knew what his father was there for--of course he knew about the play. It was all too good to be true. Todd was right. He was always right. Neil’s father always, *always* found out about things, no matter how well he kept a secret. No matter how much he wanted it--his father always found a way to ruin things. But he didn't want him to ruin this. Not this time.

“Wait, before you say anything, please let me explain--!”

His father sprung up like he had just insulted him to his face. The man’s face scrunched from a numb disappointment to anger, his eyebrows coming in toward each other and down, furrowed.

“Don’t you dare talk back to me.” Neil backed up, toward the door, cowering in fear like he always did when his dad raised his voice at him. “It’s bad enough that you’ve wasted your time with this...absurd *acting* business, but you *deliberately* deceived me.” His father stepped toward him, expressing his dominance, his power, flaunting in his wounded son’s face. “How--How did you expect to get away with this?” Neil said nothing, letting his eyes drag down to the floor, desperately avoiding his father’s stern glare. “Answer me.” Neil’s mouth didn't move, nor his tongue, which was stuck to the bottom of his mouth. “Who put you up to it? Was it this new man, this--Mr. Keating?”

“No, I--”

“It was me, Mr. Perry.” A small, meek voice coming from behind Neil’s back entered the room, silencing both of them. Neil turned to find Todd, standing in the door frame, looking somehow terrified but brave at the same time. “I was the one who told him about the play. I--I showed him the poster for the audition, and I encouraged him to go, and I helped him write that letter to get permission. It was all me.

Mr. Keating didn't know anything about it. So you can blame me all you want, just don't blame Neil." Neil was breathless, staring at Todd's flared up red cheeks. He never thought Todd would do something like that.

"And this is?" Neil's eyes darted from Todd to his still angry father, who lingered a few feet away.

"This is Todd Anderson, father. My roommate."

"Ah." He looked at Todd, right into his eyes, and Todd immediately shrank in his spot. "Mr. Anderson, I'd appreciate it if you would stay out of my son's business or sway him from his studies, you understand?"

"Father--" Neil instinctively felt the need to defend Todd, like an involuntary motion.

"And you," Mr. Perry said, turning toward his son, "Tomorrow, you go to them and tell them that you're quitting."

"No," he spat, "I can't." He felt his hands start to shake as he countered his father. "I have the main part! The performance is tomorrow night!"

"I don't care if the world comes to an end tomorrow night, you are through with that play! You understand?"

Neil could feel Todd's presence in the corner of his eye; he had already embarrassed himself enough.

"Yes, sir."

"I made a great many sacrifices to get you here, Neil. You will not let me down."

"No, sir."

He hated letting Todd see him like that, being obedient like some kind of dog. It made him feel less like a leader, less like a man. He felt his tears well up in his eyes, but he couldn't push them back. Once his father finally strutted out of the room, with one final stern glance at Todd, Neil fell onto his bed and buried his face into his pillow. He tried to hold back a sob so Todd wouldn't think him weak, but it escaped his mouth like a cough you hold back in the middle of class.

“I’m sorry, Neil--I shouldn’t have said anything--I--I just…” Todd made his way toward Neil’s bed, let his hand hover over Neil’s head, but pulled it back, thinking he might not want to be touched. “I’m so sorry.” He couldn’t stand there anymore. He couldn’t listen to Neil’s involuntary and all-consuming sobs that sounded like a toddler who dropped his ice cream. Todd, holding back his own tears, walked back toward the door and made his way back to dinner.

+

He didn't see Neil at dinner. No one seemed to question it, but Todd was stuck sitting at the table, shaking slightly, knowing he’d break if anyone asked him what was wrong. He tried to focus on other things, like the way Charlie and Knox kept sneaking these intense stares at each other, or the way Pitts was getting his spaghetti all over the table spread, or how Meeks was chastising him for splattering sauce onto his glasses. He even tried listening to Cameron’s blabbering about the recent test in Hager’s, but it was no use. His mind was consumed by Neil.

When he meandered his way back to his dorm room, he was expecting Neil to be in the same state, or maybe asleep, but when he opened the door, Neil had taken off his coat and scarf and was sitting on his bed, like he was waiting for him.

“Hey,” he whispered in a hoarse voice when Todd entered.

“Hi.” Todd wasn’t sure what to say; he didn't know if he had crossed some kind of boundary, so he just walked back to his own bed and sat across from him. They were silent for a second as Todd stared at his shoes and Neil stared at him. “Neil, I--”

“Don’t apologize,” Neil whispered softly. “Please.”

“Okay.”

“Todd, look at me.” Todd’s head lifted slowly, revealing his watery green eyes. “I’m not mad.”

“You’re not?” Todd’s voice was shaky, broken.

“No. No, of course not.”

“I just--I couldn’t let him yell at you like that.” Todd whimpered. “Because I--I--” He couldn’t spit it out, no matter how many times he formed the words on his lips. “I hate seeing what he does to you.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“No, I...I’m sorry for you.” They sat in silence again, and both boys tried to come up with ways to say what they had on the tip of their tongue, but couldn’t.

“I, uh…” Neil settled on something else. “I got you something.”

“I told you that you didn't have to get me anything.”

“I wanted to.” Neil watched as Todd’s lips turned into a smile, which forced the tears he had been keeping in his ducts to spill out. “I hope...I hope this is better than your desk set.” He grabbed his bag which had been laying on the floor after he threw it in haste and anger, and pulled out the weathered copy of *Leaves of Grass.* “It’s poetry by Walt Whitman.” He handed it to Todd, who looked at it with starry, wet eyes.

“Wow,” Todd said as he flipped through the pages. The corners of the pages were rough, and they all looked old and torn; Todd imagined this copy of the book passing through a family or from one friend to another, and now it had ended up with him; it was like the book had its own life. “Thank you, Neil. It’s amazing.”

“I thought you would like it.”

The page on the front said *For Todd’s eighteenth birthday. From Neil.* It was the most cherished gift he had ever received.

“What are you going to do?” Todd asked, hoping he wasn’t pushing a line. “About the play, I mean.”

Neil took a deep breath and exhaled, letting out all of his breath.

“Well, Todd, I figure I’ve come this far…” He let his tear stained cheeks pull back to form a smile. “I might as well finish it, right?”

“What about your dad?”

“My dad will always be an asshole,” Neil muttered. “Can’t be avoided. Besides, I’ve already done all the damage. One more night won’t kill him.”

Todd shuddered suddenly as the dreams that had been creeping through his mind every night and making him relive the death of his best friend over and over came back into his mind. He wanted to tell him not to, he wanted to ask him if he would stay and sit in the windowsill and talk to him about poetry or their biggest dreams like they always did and he wanted to just hear him laugh and read poetry in the cave. He didn't want to think about his dreams or what Neil's father would do to him after the play ends, but he knew that he couldn't. So instead, he just sat in that moment, and read poems in *Leaves of Grass* as Neil leaned his head against the wall and listened quietly.

Tomorrow is another day, Todd thought, *and Neil will be okay. The sun will come up and the sun will set and Neil will be right back in his bed tomorrow night. And one day, winter will be over, and the dreams will go away.* Todd repeated this sentiment over and over and over until eventually his eyelids became too heavy to keep open. And Todd, once again thinking about Neil Perry's lips--Neil's lips on his--he was able to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

this is your reminder that this fic does, indeed, have a good ending, and i am not in any way shape or form tricking you. i promise.

Chapter 8: now I know what love is

Chapter Summary

> It is time for the play, and Todd's nightmares are coming to a head. As he becomes more and more anxious as the day proceeds, will his nightmare come to fruition? Will he ever tell Neil how he feels?

The rattling of a gunshot woke Todd Anderson from his nightmare on the cold winter morning that he had been dreading ever since the dreams had started. His hands were clammy and freezing, and as he placed them on his warm thighs to warm them up, his whole body shook in response. He knew he must not have screamed because Neil was sleeping soundly in the bed beside him, letting out small, nasally snores. He checked the time on his watch and found that it wasn't even six in the morning; he leaned back against the headboard of his bed and looked outside his window as the snow started falling lightly from the cloudy sky onto the snow covered grass. Sometimes, Hell-ton could look peaceful. His body ached from the nightmare, and his mind was anything but still, and yet he didn't feel he could go back to sleep. Instead, he watched Neil snore on the other side of the room as he flipped through the last few pages of *Leaves of Grass.*

There, on the last page, was a message written at the top in cursive handwriting. *Nunc scio quid sit amor,* it said. *Now I know what love is,* from the Latin. He brushed his fingers over the cursive handwriting, wondering which of the previous owners had left such a message for their lovers. His face felt warm thinking about someone that devoted. He closed the book slowly and left it on his desk as he stood up to get dressed. Later, he would wear his finest suit for the play, and slick back his hair and drag his comb through it a hundred times, but now, as he shivered from the cold winter air, put on his regular buttoned up shirt, green tie, and a sweatshirt over the top, combined with his black trousers. As he saw himself in the mirror, he looked completely, and utterly, normal. Neil, even as he slept, looked unique, simply extraordinary. It was impossible, Todd thought, to have a man as remarkable as Neil Perry love a man as simple and forgettable as Todd Anderson. It was astonishing that he even kept him around as his friend.

But there had to be something about him, hadn't there? There had to be. After the dreams, Todd couldn't help but feel like in some way

they were connected, like there was an invisible string connecting them together. What if it *meant* something?

What does he do then?

+

"Psst."

Knox Overstreet heard the distinct noise from behind him, and rolled his eyes in response. "*Psst.*" He then felt a finger jarringly poke him right in his spine, causing him to shudder all over his body. His jaw clenched as he tried to keep himself from turning around and smacking Charlie Dalton as hard as he could. Instead, he slightly turned his head, indicating that he was listening. He could see Charlie's hand in the peripheral, holding out a small, folded up piece of paper. Charlie then let the paper drop from his hand onto the ground, letting Knox lean down to pick it up as if he were picking up his own piece of paper that he had dropped. A sigh involuntary escaped Knox's mouth. *I'm stuck with this man, aren't I?* he thought. As he unfolded the paper, he watched to make sure Mr. Keating wouldn't notice, even though the man was definitely more aware of things than other teachers. Mr. McAllister wouldn't notice if someone was getting off in the back of his class, he was so oblivious. It was immediately apparent that Charlie had written him a poem; a series of couplets strewn across the page. Knox's cheeks immediately warmed up, and he dug his fingers through his hair as he read down the page:

knox on my mind

a poem by nuwanda

i've got knox on my mind

he's bothering me all the time

can't eat, can't think,

can't sleep, can't drink,

even though i fill my cup

his face has got me acting up

even when i listen to mr. keating

knox is just so much more appealing

i really do have knox on my mind

i even took the time to rhyme

so wait for me outside of class

if you don't, your ass is grass

be there, or be square,

just you and me, my favorite pair

we'll have time to make the play

but with my love i want to spend my day

so now i'm afraid we've reached the end

of the best poem i have ever penned.

Knox had never had a poem written about him before. No one had

ever called him “my love” before. His face heated up involuntarily; he could feel the warmth in his cheeks radiate like the heat coming off of a campfire. His eyes wandered across each line, each letter written in Charlie’s sloppy handwriting, over and over and over until he memorized it, so he could repeat it to himself when he was alone. All of the mellow voices in the room were now tuned out, like a distant hum; the only voice he could hear was the one in his head, Charlie’s, reading his simple rhymed poem that had completely thrown Knox off guard. He could feel Charlie’s eyes on the back of his neck, like he was expecting some kind of reaction; however, if he had only seen the front of him, Charlie would have known that his poem had definitely caused a chemical reaction, stirring up in the bottom of Knox’s stomach like a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

“Mr. Overstreet, are you alright over there?”

Knox’s head shot up immediately as the whole class turned to stare at him.

“I’m--I’m fine, I’m not…uh, feeling well.”

“Do you need to go to the nurse?”

“*No,* no, I’m fine.” He slumped into his seat, trying to hide his embarrassment. Hastily, he grabbed his pencil from off of his desk and wrote a response on his own piece of paper (he was keeping the poem). He wrote simply *I’ll be there,* and dropped the paper back the same way Charlie had earlier. Somehow, Knox could feel Charlie’s giddiness from behind him, like it was an aura radiating off of him. Reluctantly he folded up his poem and slid it into his folder, knowing that if he stared at it any longer he wouldn’t be able to focus.

Later, when class was over, Charlie whispered in Knox’s ear where he wanted to meet him (outside, by the dumpsters, how *romantic*) and darted out quickly while the others badgered Knox about his awkward appearance in class. *Your face was so red,* Neil said. *He must have been thinking about Chris,* Pitts joked. *If only they knew,* Knox thought, *that I’m secretly dating class prankster and all-around asshole Charlie Dalton.* Neil had invited him back to study some before he had to leave to get ready for the play, but Knox had told them he had to go, he had something he had to take care of first, before they got ready. He wondered if they could see through his blushing cheeks and distant responses that he was focused on something--someone--else. As soon as they had rounded the corner, Knox bolted in the other direction, letting his shoes squeak against the floor as he jogged down the halls

to the back doors that led to the dumpsters.

“Charlie?” Knox opened the doors to find no one, just trash. “Charlie.” He walked out further and saw Charlie, far off in the distance, in the fields. “What the hell are you doing?” He yelled.

“Get over here, Overstreet!”

He didn't want to sweat, not when he had to get ready in a few hours for Neil’s play, but he ran anyway, through the tall grass all the way to Charlie Dalton in the middle of the field, yards and yards away from Hell-ton.

“What are you doing out here?” Charlie smiled at him for a second, and then took Knox’s head in his hands and kissed his lips tenderly. “Charlie,” Knox whispered quietly, we’re in public.” They might have had the grass to hide their legs, but their heads were still sticking out, and they weren’t so far away that no one could be able to tell it was them.

“I know,” Charlie said with a smirk on his face. “That’s the point.” He kissed Knox again, this time harder, with his tongue. In the back of his mind, Knox had an alarm going off, knowing someone could easily spot them and call them out, but at the same time, he wanted this so badly, so deeply, he couldn’t help but wrap his arms around Charlie and pull him closer, opening his mouth wider and letting him explore freely. Charlie knew what he was doing--he had kissed many a person before, but never like this--and Knox felt like he was learning from him: every move, every touch, every kiss was like a new awakening, a new Knox emerging. When they pulled away, Charlie was out of breath. “I wanted...to kiss you out in the open. Not in our room. Not in secret.” He put his head against Knox’s shoulder, and Knox put his hand in his hair. “I don’t want to love you in secret.”

“Me neither.” He pulled Charlie back, so he could look him in the eyes. “I’m sorry about all that shit I said before. I just wasn’t expecting this. I wasn’t expecting *you.*” Charlie smiled softly, and let his hair fall into his face.

“I wasn’t expecting you either, Overstreet.” They let their faces touch for a while as they sat in the grass, a mix of kisses and touches and intimacy, something that felt so rebellious, but felt so right. “You know, we should probably go,” Charlie whispered. “We have to get ready for the play.”

Knox dug his face into the crook in Charlie’s neck.

“Can’t we sit here a little longer?”

Charlie chuckled and let his fingers drag through Knox’s hair.

“You know, if I knew a simple poem could get you all riled up like that, I should’ve started writing them for you ages ago.” Knox smiled against his chest and lifted his head up.

“Who knew you could be so romantic?”

“I knew. You just never let me try.” Knox stood up suddenly, then let his hand dangle to let Charlie up.

“Come on, Nuwanda. Let’s go.”

“Oh, *now* you want to leave.” Charlie held on to Knox’s hand as he pulled Charlie up into another kiss. “I can show you later how romantic I can be, if you want.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really. Now let’s go, you dork,” Charlie added. “before they start looking for us.”

“Okay.”

“Wipe that smile off their face, or they’ll know we’ve been doing stuff out here.”

“Okay.”

He didn't. It was physically impossible. But Charlie didn't mind it.

+

It was starting to turn dark outside, the sky dissolving from a warm orange and pink into a dark blue, into a black, extending across the sky. Before, earlier in the day, Todd could ignore the deep dread that was festering in his stomach, but now, as the sky darkened, the dread was coming up inside him through his throat and through his veins as he stared at himself in the mirror. He looked absolutely miserable; his face was as pale as a ghost and his hands were trembling as he brought his hand up to his head to comb back his hair. The others

joked and goofed around beside him, dressed up fancily in their patterned suits and black ties. Cameron was going through his hair for the millionth time even though it always looked the same; Charlie was in the bathroom stall doing God knows what, and Knox was standing against the white brick wall waiting for Charlie to come out. He had a childish glee on his face and a permanent red glow to his cheeks, like he was holding a secret that no one else knew.

Todd gripped the white porcelain sink with force, like he was going to rip it from the wall and throw it across the room. He couldn't think of anything else but the dream, and his mind was thumping so hard the corners of his vision were blurred. He tried to splash water in his face, but it didn't work; instead, it just made it hurt worse, reminding him of the flakes of snow that fell on his face in his dreams as he wailed out in the field.

"Todd." Knox stepped up to him, noticing his blank stare at himself in the mirror, and grasped his shoulder. "You okay?" Todd looked into the mirror at Knox, who had a genuinely concerned expression, and nodded meekly, which was all he could muster. "It's going to be alright," Todd heard in his right ear faintly, "and we're going to have a good time. Okay?" Todd stared at the water swirling around the sink and slipping down the drain. He nodded once more, and let his eyes close for just a second in order to calm himself. He felt Knox's hand go from his shoulder to his back, rubbing it in circles like Todd was a sick child that needed comfort.

"We're gonna miss Neil's entrance," Meeks said.

"Yeah, hurry up, Nuwanda," Knox said, pulling away from Todd.

"Why don't you come make me, Knoxious?"

Knox couldn't help but blush. Suddenly, the door burst open and Charlie stepped out, looking more handsome than ever. Knox wanted to step up and kiss him in an act of desperate passion, but he still wasn't sure. He knew Todd wouldn't mind, he was like them, maybe Meeks wouldn't mind, but he wasn't sure about Pitts, definitely not as sure about Cameron. So he kept his eyes on Todd, watching him nervously as Todd's eyes glazed over with anxiety. He wished he knew how to ease his worry. Charlie let his hand linger on Knox's shoulder for a second.

"Come, boys. Let's go see a goddamn play."

Todd felt his whole body tighten. He could make it through this night.

It was just a dream, a long, depressing, overwhelming dream. He couldn't let it get to him. Not tonight, not when Neil needed him.

He followed loosely behind as they skipped through the hallways giddily, Knox and Charlie trying to hide their secret affection as their hands lightly grazed each other's. They went down the stairs, out the front door, and into the snow; it was cold, paralyzing snow, leaving Todd's face damp as he walked into the flurries falling down from the sky. He could make it through this night. It was just a dream, it wasn't real.

He crammed himself beside Pitts and Meeks in the backseat, staring at his feet and not at the white clumps falling against the window.

"It's going to be a good show," Mr. Keating said as he started the car. "We're in for a treat, boys." He could feel Mr. Keating staring at him through the rearview mirror, so he lifted his head up slowly to show he wasn't completely gone.

He could make it through this night.

+

Neil felt a mix of terror, anxiety, and complete and absolute euphoria all at once.

He liked being the crown prince of the production. He liked flowing through the actors and actresses and the crew in their all black outfits and the stage manager and everyone else; he felt like he was a part of something bigger than himself. In his costume, the whole persona felt complete, and for the next two hours he could actually transform, he could become Puck completely. He needed it; just one night of not being himself.

But he also couldn't wait to get back, to see Todd again, to watch him sit in his bed and read the book that *he* bought him. He peeked out of the curtains as the crowd was shuffling in, and there Todd was, sitting among the other Dead Poets and Mr. Keating. He felt his face burn up with happiness, like everything was coming together. The play, school, *Todd,* everything was working out. His father was nowhere to be seen. Perfection.

“Neil, are you ready?” The stage director called from behind him. He got one last look at Todd, then turned to her.

“I’m ready.”

+

Neil was like an angel. A complete angel.

Todd imagined this is what Neil’s heaven would be like. He noticed that Charlie and Knox were holding each other’s fingers--not exactly holding hands, just letting their fingers dangle next to each other and intertwine. He wondered what it would be like to be that sure of himself, to be that daring, to actually go for what he wanted. He never went for anything he wanted; his poetry, respect, *Neil,* everything. As he looked up at Neil, frolicking around the stage like the angel that he was, he wondered what it would be like to let his fingers intertwine with Neil’s or to let their lips touch and feel their skin graze each other. That would be his heaven, he thought.

“He’s good,” Charlie whispered eventually, leaning over him, “he’s really good.” Neil was a great actor. Todd wasn’t as good. He knew Mr. Keating could see Todd’s shaking hands that he tried to keep still in-between his things; he focused on the play, of course, but out of the corner of his eye he frequently checked on him.

The play was reaching its end. Neil was the only person left on the stage, giving a final monologue. He was looking right at him, staring through Todd’s soul like he was the only person in the whole audience. His hands stopped shaking for just a second as he looked at Neil’s smiling face and beaming cheeks.

He would tell him tonight, right after the play was over; he would run to him as soon as the curtain closed and he would find him behind stage and take his face in his hands and kiss him. He would be like Charlie Dalton, like *Nuwanda,* and he would do something with his life for something in his life.

But then Neil’s eyes darted toward the left, toward the back of the room. Brought back to reality, Todd’s head snapped to look behind him, and there was Neil’s father, standing in the back beside the double doors and looking the angriest he had ever been.

No, no, no, no, no.

+

That's when Neil catches the glimpse of his father's disapproving, angry stare, going right through him and making his heart sink into his stomach.

He always does this. He always knows. He *always* ruins things.

No, not tonight, not now, not ever again. He looks back at Todd and he can see the worry in his eyes. No, he wouldn't let his father get to him. Not tonight.

+

He couldn't run backstage to Neil.

While everyone was getting up and leaving in their groups one at a time, Todd was standing, frozen, as Neil's dad went to the stage director and requested to talk to him personally. And then Mr. Keating dragged all of them out into the lobby of Henley Hall to stand and talk about the play and the deeper meanings and what did they think of the *poetry* and what did they think of *Neil* and what did they think about *Shakespeare,* and usually Todd would hang on every word but right then he just wanted to run out the door and go away as far as he could.

Neil came out, eventually, through the double doors, with his father's hands gripping on them like he was afraid of losing him. His eyes screamed quiet desperation as the members of the Dead Poets Society swarmed him, trying to tell him how good he was and how amazing the play went and *god, who knew you could act,* but Neil wasn't reacting, just being pulled along by his father like a dog on a leash, with no agency. *Neil, Neil, Neil, Neil--!* They were all scrambling for his attention, but Todd stood in the back, trying to catch Neil's eyes but being covered up by Mr. Perry's body as he forced Neil into the car.

“Neil! Mr. Perry, come on!”

“Don’t make things worse than it already is,” Mr. Keating said. *Don’t make things worse than it already is.* Todd stood in the damn snow, staring into the window at Neil, who for the first time looked back at him with sad, pleading eyes. It was all happening, all over again. The dream. He stared for as long as he could until the car pulled away, with Neil’s eyes going with them. Todd crumpled, defeated, all of his energy that went into his facade being drained, leaving him on his knees in the cold, wet, snow.

“Oh, Todd,” he heard Knox say as he came and put his hands on Todd’s shoulders.

“I’m going to be sick,” Todd whimpered. He puked up what was left of his dinner, leaving a yellowish spot on the snow. “Neil--!”

“Come on, Todd,” Charlie said, joining Knox in helping him up, “let’s go back, okay?”

“But Neil,” Todd repeated. “He--He’s--”

“You don’t know that.” He put his warm hands on Todd’s frozen cheeks. “Neil will be okay. You, my friend, need some sleep for once.” That was impossible, he knew that, but he followed along anyway, knowing there was nothing he could do but wait.

+

It was midnight, and Todd was standing outside where Neil had given him the unmanned flying desk set. He was standing there, looking down at where all of the papers had flown all over the rock, flying far away from Welton. He looked up at the stars, thinking about how little he was. Todd’s hands were so cold holding onto the moist rocks covered in ice. He couldn’t sleep, so he snuck out the door to get some fresh air. He knew he’d probably get in trouble if he got caught, but he didn't think getting fresh air would get him too many demerits.

There was nothing he could do but wait. He got through the night, just barely, and now he was standing there, hoping that when he went back into his bed and went back to sleep to wake up in the morning Neil would be back in his bed, safe and sound. That was all he could

ask for. Tears gently fell down his cheeks like the snowflakes melting on his cheeks.

“Todd?”

His mind was playing tricks on him, now, surely. Neil was at his house, hopefully sleeping soundly, alive, snoring like he always does.

“Todd.” This time he wasn’t sure, so he turned around, and there Neil was, standing in his suit and holding his twig crown from the play. He was smiling. “You weren’t in the room when I came in.”

“*Neil.*”

“What did you think about the play? I wanted to talk to you alone but my father, he…” Neil let his head droop. “...He had other plans.”

“What happened?”

“He said at first he was furious about me doing the play against his permission, that I continued to disobey him, which was understandable.” His head propped back up, and you could almost see a tear in his eye. “And he said he was even considering sending me to military school. I almost had a heart attack right there. But then he said...God, Todd, I can’t even believe it. He said...he was *proud* of me. That--that when he went in there and saw all those people giving me a standing ovation, and when all of the people were trying to congratulate me...he said he felt proud.” Todd felt his heart start beating faster, and the warmth in his blood was heating up the cold he felt all over his body. “He said I could keep acting, as long as I kept my grades up. Can you believe it?” Neil came up to him and grabbed the sides of his arms, pulling him closer.

“No, I can’t. That’s...that’s great, Neil.”

“Wait. Todd, you’ve been crying.” He loosened his grip on Todd’s arms.

“No, it’s...it’s nothing.”

“No, it’s not nothing.” Neil took his thumb and wiped away the tear that was dripping down Todd’s cheeks. “There’s something wrong, isn’t there?” Neil could always look inside of his brain and figure out what was wrong with him. Todd knew that he was talking about the dreams, about the mental turmoil he had been going through for months. He knew that there, tonight, was the dream coming to a

head.

“It’s better, now that you’re here.” He had to explain, he knew that. He drove Neil mad for months with all of his screaming. “Those dreams I had...about you dying? They all...they all took place today, after the play. I was so scared--” Todd’s eyes darted down to his feet again. “I was so scared that you weren’t going to make it. And that--I dunno, maybe there was something more I should have done. So I was standing out here, and I was thinking about all the things I should have said, the things I would have regret not saying--I--” His head shot back up. “I should have said it before, with or without the dream.”

Neil’s lips curved into a wide smile as he looked into Todd’s eyes.

“Said what?”

“You *know* what.”

The thing Todd should have said ages ago, before the play, before the unmanned flying desk set, before the snowball fight, before. He should have told him as soon as he realized it, so they could have as much time as they could have ever wanted. Maybe that was the point of the dream; maybe the point of it was never to warn him, to show him the actual future. Maybe it was just to show him what life could have been in another universe, in another set of Todd’s and Neil’s. The dream was begging him, telling him, *this is your second chance.*

“No, I don’t.”

Todd could feel Neil’s breath on his face as Neil instinctively pulled Todd even closer to him. He could feel the words on the tip of his tongue, ready to come out. He looked into Neil’s eyes--dark, dark brown--and down to his lips, which were slightly parted, with white breath escaping in pulses. Neil’s here, he’s real, he’s right in front of him, he’s letting him in. He might as well just say it; he was going to do it earlier, when he was at the play. He was going to run to him and tell him how much he wanted him.

“I...I love you,” he whispered, letting the words linger in the moment.

“You do?” Neil could feel Todd trembling in his arms.

“Y-Yes.”

Neil had been wanting to say those words, too, long ago, since the sweaty-toothed madman and the truth blanket. He remembered

staring at Todd as he spun around with his eyes closed spitting out a poem that was so beautiful that his mouth was dangling open in awe. Todd was an angel, but he didn't realize it. He was pure on the inside, but didn't know how to show it. It was only then, when he was pushed, that his purity could come out in the open, and Neil knew then that he loved him.

“I love you, too, Todd,” he whispered. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

It was true. He loved this boy--no, this man, this man who was a few months older than him, this man who didn't know how to express his feelings in words but instead on the page, this man who stared more at his feet than at the stars, he *loved* this man who worried about him for so long and who yearned for him for so long. This was the man that he loved, and he was standing right in front of him, telling him he loved him.

“I believe you.”

“Todd?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I kiss you, now?”

He always wondered what it would be like; Todd always thought it would be some kind of dream that one never actually achieves, but now Neil’s lips were in front of him, not even inches away, and Neil *wanted* him, *loved* him, *needed* him. There had never been a kiss he wanted more. In Todd fashion, he nodded, sweetly and solemnly, letting his lips turn into a giddy smile for the first time in months as Neil put his hands against Todd’s cheeks and pulled him in for a kiss. Their lips intertwined like Charlie and Knox’s fingers, brushing against each other delicately and tenderly like it was something holy. Todd, not sure where to put his hands, gripped onto Neil’s jacket, pulling him in tighter and keeping him close. He felt Neil’s tongue at his mouth and didn't know what to do. He just melted, letting Neil in to explore as he pleased.

Neil pulled back, suddenly, and they were both out of breath; they could see their own exhales in the winter air.

“I wasn’t sure if you had seen it,” Neil muttered breathlessly.

“Seen what?”

“My message. At the end of the book.” *Nunc scio quid sit amor. Now I know what love is.*

“That was you?”

Neil’s teeth broke through his smile.

“That was me.”

Todd kissed him this time with a fever of a man who had waited patiently for this moment his whole life. Neil, surprised by Todd’s assertiveness, let out a small moan in his mouth, leaving Todd just a little hard in his pants.

“We should go back,” Neil said as they parted, “We’ll freeze out here.”

“Is this really happening?” Todd whispered as he let his head rest in the crook of Neil’s neck. “Is this a dream?” He felt real; Neil’s skin was soft and covered in random freckles. There were three on the side of Neil’s neck, two on the patch of neck that Todd’s head was nestled in. He didn't want it to be a dream, but if it was, he hoped it would last forever.

“It’s really happening,” Neil said as he placed his hand on Todd’s hair. “This is real.” Todd exhaled against Neil’s skin and pulled his head back. “Let’s go inside, okay? Before we get sick.”

“Okay.”

Todd followed him inside. Welton was quiet, not an eerie quiet, but a peaceful quiet. No one noticed them as they held each other’s hands and walked down the hallways with absolutely no shame. They walked down the empty hallways and down to their own room, and when they walked in it felt completely different. They could do whatever they wanted in this room. He could touch Neil when he wanted; he could be intimate with him. Their room was free reign. It felt liberating.

Todd and Neil began to shed their wet, snow covered clothes and left them on their desk chairs as the snowflakes began to melt. Todd sat on his bed as Neil left his twig crown on his desk. Suddenly, Neil’s head turned to look back at Todd on his bed, and he came up to him, his hands cradling Todd’s head, and kissed him, tongue and all. Todd placed his hands on Neil’s back, this time just touching one layer instead of three. He could feel Neil’s spine, each vertebrae going up, up, up. When Neil pulls away, their foreheads rest against each other

for just a second.

“Goodnight, Todd.”

“Goodnight, Neil.”

Neil walks toward his bed backwards so his eyes wouldn’t break from Todd’s. He was breathless, like he was still experiencing that feeling of falling, and he fell deeply. He got in his bed, under the blanket, and turned toward the wall, and closed his eyes.

“Neil?”

He turned over in his bed to see Todd still sitting on the bed in the same position.

“Yeah?”

“Can I…sleep with you?”

Neil’s face heated up as he nodded and pushed himself toward the wall to make room. Todd walked toward Neil’s bed like he was walking into foreign territory. He slid his legs under the covers, then turned left to face him. They both stared at each other with childish pleasure for several minutes, then Todd turned back over and Neil wrapped his arm around him, keeping him close, safe, secure.

“Goodnight, Todd,” Neil said once more.

“Goodnight, Neil.”

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

With that, they fell asleep, and Todd’s mind was completely free from any and all nightmares.

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